CRY, OR
BETTER
YET, BEG

# Chapter 1:
## A Delivered Girl

The girl showed up one early-spring day, riding in the mail coach. It was late afternoon, and Bill Remmer was busy planting rose seedlings.

“Are you Mr. Bill Remmer?” the girl asked cautiously. Bill stared back at her in a daze. Her pronunciation was very smooth, but there was something off about her accent.

“Yeah, I'm Bill Remmer,” he replied.

The girl watched as Bill brushed the dirt off his hands and took off his straw hat. She flinched when she saw his tan face, no longer obscured by the shadow from the wide brim of his hat.

This reaction was nothing new to Bill. Most people reacted similarly when first seeing his rugged features and large build.

“Who are you?” he asked, frowning. The frown made him look even more threatening.

“Hello, Uncle Bill. My name is Layla Llewellyn. I come from Lovita.” She spoke clearly and slowly.

*Lovita...*

Bill now realized why she spoke with a strange accent. “Did you cross the border and come all the way to Berg by yourself?”

“Yes. I took the train,” she replied. Smiling awkwardly, she straightened her posture to an unnatural degree.

The mailman who had brought her walked up to them. “Ah, I see she's already met you, Mr. Remmer.”

“Good timing,” Bill replied. “Why did you bring her here?”

“I saw her walking with her luggage all alone in front of the station. I asked her where she was headed, and she said she was on her way to find Mr. Bill Remmer, the gardener for the Herhardt family. I was on my way here to deliver mail anyway, so I brought her along,” the mailman replied with a smile. He then handed Bill a letter. The envelope showed that the letter was from distant

relatives of Bill's who lived in the neighboring country of Lovita.

Bill immediately tore open the envelope and started reading the letter. It told the story of an orphaned child who had been taken in by a series of relatives, all of whom were too poor to able to continue fostering her. The child's name was Layla Llewellyn. Thus, it seemed that the little girl standing in front of him was the orphan mentioned in the letter. He let out a bewildered chuckle and grumbled. “Damn people. This news sure traveled fast.”

None of this little orphan's relatives in Lovita could foster her. Even though Bill was only distantly related to her, his circumstances were better than any of theirs, so they had sent her to him. However, they had added that if his situation did not allow him to raise her, he could leave her at an orphanage.

“These people can drop dead. No matter what things were like, how could they send that little girl all the way here by herself?” he muttered, crumpling up the letter and throwing it to the ground. Now that he had grasped the whole situation, his face grew red with anger. She had been passed from family to family like a hot potato, until there were no more families left to take her in. Then, she had simply been handed the contact details of a distant relative living in a foreign country, and sent off across the border to him. It was like she was being banished from her home country.

Just then, the girl, who had been watching Bill quietly, said, “Excuse me, Uncle Bill. I'm not actually that young. I'll be twelve in a few weeks.” She was being careful to speak in as mature a manner as she could, and had slightly raised her heels off the ground to make herself appear taller.

Even more bewildered than before, Bill let out another chuckle. She was so small; he had first guessed her age to be around ten. He was happy at least to learn that she was older than his guess.

Eventually, the mailman who had delivered the troublesome girl left, leaving the two alone in the garden. Bill put his head in his hands and asked God for guidance. While he was technically related to the girl's late father, he hadn't seen him in over twenty years. To

think, this daughter of a distant relative was left with him to raise her. This tiny little girl with the widower Bill Remmer!

Although the early-spring weather was still quite chilly, the girl was wearing only a flimsy outfit. She also looked thin as a rail. The only other aspects of her appearance that stood out were her big, green eyes, and her blonde hair, which looked like it was made of gold thread. Bill came to the firm conclusion that he could not take care of her. It then occurred to him that the only other option was to place her in an orphanage, the thought of which upset him just as much. He once again quietly cursed the relatives that had caused this mess. The girl flinched, but maintained a brave facial expression. However, she was unable to hide her quivering hands, or her lower lip, which had grown red because she had been chewing on it.

“Follow me,” he said, shaking his head as he started to walk. “Let's eat first, and then I can think things through.” His curt words were carried away by the evening breeze. Layla, who had been standing in the same spot since she arrived, started following behind him. At first, she walked slowly and tentatively, but gradually her steps became light and joyful.

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“Is that all you're going to eat?” Bill asked, frowning at the small portion the girl had dished onto her plate.

“Yes. I only eat a little. Really,” she replied, smiling.

Bill grew slightly more frustrated than he already was. “Listen, kiddo, I hate kids with small appetites.”

The girl's eyes widened at this harsh comment. She had pulled up her sleeves, exposing her slender wrists to the light shining down from the table lamp.

“No matter what you're served, you should eat lots, like a cow,” he said. His face grew more stern.

For a moment she stared into space, blinking slowly as she considered his words. Then she took another piece of meat and slice

of bread and placed them on her plate, then started scarfing them down voraciously, making it seem like she had been quite hungry after all. “Maybe I can't quite eat like a cow, but I am a good eater, Uncle,” she said, smiling at him with her breadcrumb-covered lips.

“Yes, I can see that clearly now,” he replied, chuckling as he took a sip of liquor. “Aren't you afraid of me?” he then asked, intentionally making an intense grimace as he looked at her. However, she simply stared right back at him, not flinching or avoiding his gaze for a moment.

“Nope,” she replied. “You never yell at me. You gave me all this delicious food. I'm grateful for those things. You seem like a good person.”

*What kind of life was she living before this, that such simple things make her grateful?* he wondered. This gave him a bitter taste in his mouth, so he stood up and poured himself a large glass of beer. The letter had stated that the girl's mother had run away with another man, abandoning her daughter and her father. Her father had been so distraught by this that he became an alcoholic and ended up dying of alcohol poisoning. After that, the girl had been passed from relative's home to relative's home. Pondering over all this, Bill realized that her life had been far from easy. Even so, he still thought it was out of the question for him to be the one to raise her. As he swigged his beer, he resolved to make a decision on what to do with the girl by the following week.

* * *

“Did you all hear? Mr. Remmer, the gardener, has started taking care of a young girl!” exclaimed a young maid as she rushed into the house staffs break room. Everyone in the break room turned to face her.

“A girl? Mr. Remmer? I'd sooner believe that he was taking care of a lion, or an elephant,” a servant said, snorting.

Bill Remmer, the gardener for the House of Herhardt, was a man with an innate talent for growing flowers. Thanks to this talent, he

had maintained his job for twenty years already, despite his short temper and unsociable personality. He was so even-handed in his treatment of everyone that he acted the same way with the Herhardt family as he did with his coworkers. Even so, the family trusted him deeply. And none of them so much as Dowager Herhardt did. She had an eccentric love of flowers, so she had limitless understanding and tolerance when it came to anything connected to her garden. Even the cottage that Bill had been provided in the woods behind the mansion had been her idea.

Bill lived a simple life. He worked in the garden, and rested in his cottage. Other than having the occasional drink with his coworkers, he spent most of his time in the company of flowers and trees. It had been over a decade since his wife had passed away from an illness, and yet he rarely saw other women. And now that stone-faced man was taking care of a young girl?

Just as everyone in the break room agreed that the rumor had to be false, a maid standing by the window shouted, “Oh my, looks like it's true! Take a look over there.” She pointed through window as she watched with widened eyes.

Everyone rushed to the window. As soon as they saw what the maid was pointing at, they reacted with just as much surprise as she had. Bill was on the far side of the garden, doing his work in his usual, hunched-over posture. And following right behind him was a little girl, just like the rumor. Her golden hair, which was woven into a braid, swung like a pendulum behind her with each step.

“I still haven't made up my mind,” Bill repeated each time anyone asked him about the girl. “She can't stay here, so I'll have to think of another solution.” As he continued to delay making up his mind, spring turned into summer.

Meanwhile, Layla Llewellyn gradually became a part of the household, and the staff grew used to seeing her busily roaming the gardens and forests of the estate.

“Looks like she's grown a bit,” Chef Mona remarked, laughing to herself as she glanced out the window.

Layla was strolling through the woods behind the cottage, looking at all the various herbs and flowers growing there.

“She still has a long way to go,” Bill replied. “She's still small for her age.”

“Come on, Bill. Raising kids isn't the same as growing plants. They don't shoot up to full height all of a sudden one morning,” Mona replied, shaking her head as she set her basket down on the table.

“What’s in there?” Bill asked.

“Cookies and cake,” she replied.

“There was a tea party at the mansion yesterday.”

“I hate sweet things.”

“So what? These are for Layla,” Mona casually replied.

Bill's dark brow furrowed at this. The girl's stay there was supposed to be temporary, and yet somewhere along the way, the household staff had started taking care of her. They asked Bill how she was doing, brought food for her, and sometimes even went to visit her. This bothered Bill.

“You should buy her some new clothes. If she grows any more, her skirt won't reach down to her knees,” said Mona, clicking her tongue as she watched Layla chasing after a bird.

Bill couldn't dispute her point. He knew nothing about children, and yet even he could clearly see that her clothes didn't fit her anymore.

Just when Mona was about to leave, she glanced towards the window again and gasped. Running to the window, she shouted, “Oh my! My goodness! Look at her!” Bill calmly glanced in the direction she was pointing.

The bird Layla was chasing had landed on a tree branch, and Layla had immediately started climbing swiftly up the tree, moving as nimbly and effortlessly as a squirrel.

“Yep, she's sure got a knack for climbing trees,” Bill flatly remarked.

Mona glared at him. “Bill! You knew she liked to climb trees, and

you just let her do it? Is this your idea of how to raise a child?"

"As you can see, she's growing up to be nice and strong."

"You're raising that girl to be a tomboy! My goodness," Mona loudly complained.

However, Bill just kept peeking out the window, barely listening. Layla was perched on a tree branch, watching the birds flutter about the treetops. During the past few months while she had been staying at the Herhardt estate, it had become clear that Layla was full of curiosity about the world around her. Flowers and herbs, birds and insects—whatever caught her eye would pique her curiosity and her wonder.

One day, when she hadn't returned for dinner, Bill had gone into the forest looking for her. He had found her sitting by the river, gazing at a flock of waterfowl. She had been so captivated by sight; she hadn't noticed him calling her name repeatedly.

Mona spent awhile longer stridently lecturing Bill, then finally left. Bill shook his head to clear the echoing sound of Mona's scolding from his ears, then he sauntered to the area behind his cottage. As soon as Layla saw him, she waved at him and gleefully shouted, "Uncle!"

She then climbed down the tree just as quickly as she had climbed up it, and zipped over to Bill, stopping right in front of him. She was dressed in a drab, gray dress. Not only was the skirt too short for her, but the sleeves were also too. Realizing that it would be improper for her to meet Duke Herhardt while wearing hand-me-down clothing, Bill decided that he would have to buy her a new outfit after all.

Once they arrived at the cottage's back door, he turned to her and impulsively said, "Go in and get ready. I'll be waiting for you out here."

She looked bewildered for a moment, then a fearful expression flashed across her face as she asked, "B-but, why, Uncle?"

"Don't look so scared. We're just going into town to buy you some clothes." He cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck,

then added, “Duke Herhardt will be arriving soon. You can't meet him looking like that.”

“The duke? That's the owner of this estate, right?”

“That's right. It's summer break now, so he'll be returning home.”

“Summer break? Does the duke go to school?” Layla asked, tilting her head and squinting her eyes.

Bill laughed and stroked her disheveled hair. “The duke is only eighteen years old. He has no choice but to go to school.”

“What?! He's eighteen? The duke?”

Bill found her reaction so cute, he started laughing louder than before. He stroked her hair again. Against his rough fingertips, her hair felt as soft as cotton.

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A train from the capital arrived at the platform at Karlsbar Station. The attendants that had been waiting all walked in perfect order to the door of the first-class car, where they lined up and stood at attention. Soon, a tall, slim boy descended from the train onto the platform.

“Hello, Master,” said Hessen, the butler. After his polite greeting, he and all the rest of the attendants bowed their heads respectfully. Standing with an elegant posture, Matthias gave a slight nod in recognition of their greeting. His red lips were smiling in a subtle but not unfriendly way.

The attendants from the House of Herhardt only started moving once Matthias had taken a few strides forward. The crowd of onlookers quickly parted to let them pass through. Matthias walked the length of the platform at an unyieldingly brisk pace. When he exited the station and saw the carriage waiting for him out front, he snickered and said, “Oh my, a carriage.”

“Ah... yes, Master. Dowager Herdardt doesn't trust cars.”

“I know. For Grandmother, cars are no more than vulgar, dangerous hunks of metal.”

“I apologize. Next time I'll-”

“No. I don't mind doing things the classic way now and then.” Matthias then calmly boarded the carriage. His long arms and legs, which were still a bit lanky at his young age, moved in a smooth, unhurried manner.

Once he was aboard, the carriage started moving, quickly picking up speed until the horses were galloping. After passing through the city square and the busy shopping district, it grew relatively quiet in the carriage. A separate carriage carrying Matthias's luggage followed a moderate distance behind, its golden crest gleaming in the sunlight.

# Chapter 2:
## The Slayer of Beautiful Birds

Matthias sat deep in his seat, staring out the carriage window, while his butler Hessen thoroughly briefed him on all his family's pending issues. These issues included an upcoming visit from some relatives who were going to be spending the summer in Arvis, several social gatherings, and insurance issues for the merchant vessel that would be setting sail the following month. Matthias showed he was listening by responding with brief replies or nods.

The business was run by the directors, while family affairs were handled by the two ladies of the house, Matthias's mother and grandmother. However, final decisions always fell to Matthias himself. This was a responsibility that he had held since the age of twelve. Hessen finished his report just as they reached Platanus Road, which led to the Herhardt estate.

Matthias was sitting with his head tilted, gazing at the familiar scenery. The road was lined on either side with tall trees that arched towards each other, as if holding hands. The sunlight dappled the road with a beautiful pattern as it flowed through the fluttering leaves.

Once they entered the estate, a white mansion with a deep-blue roof came into view. Matthias's mother and grandmother were standing in front of the mansion, ready to receive the head of the household. As Matthias straightened his already-straight tie, the carriage came to a stop and the door opened.

“Welcome home, Matthias,” said Dowager Katharina von Herhardt, smiling brightly as she greeted her grandson. Matthias bowed his head and accepted a kiss from his grandmother. His mother, Elise von Herhardt, greeted him in a more direct manner, hugging him lightly as she smiled and said, “You've grown, I see.” Her black hair, which matched that of her son, gleamed in the early-summer sun.

Matthias looked back at her with the same smile. He then offered similar greetings to the servants lined up to see him. He effortlessly displayed polished decorum and proper etiquette in his every word and action. In moments like this, the question of whether he was a man or still just a boy became moot. He was simply Duke Herhardt, the perfect head of this household.

With his mother and grandmother walking on either side of him, he took the lead and crossed through the mansion's main hall. Before climbing the stairs, he glanced up and looked at the huge chandelier, which was kept lit even during the day. Beyond that, he saw the Herhardt family crest imprinted on the ceiling.

He was a Herhardt. The family name was associated with cool-headed intellect, gracious demeanor, and self-possession. Matthias had never had any doubts or complaints about the life he led as Duke Herhardt. He knew exactly what this life required of him, and he accepted it readily. It was as natural to him as breathing, and as easy. Lowering his gaze again, he ascended the stairs with large steps.

* * *

The servants were finally able to breathe easy now that their master had entered the mansion.

All of Arvis had been bustling with activity for days as everyone prepared to receive Duke Herhardt. Everything had to be perfect on the day he arrived, including the household staff. Even the low-ranking servants that the duke would never lay eyes on had a duty to carry themselves with grace and dignity.

Layla Llewellyn, Arvis's uninvited guest, was no exception. “Did the duke arrive? Already?” she muttered in a slightly disappointed tone, standing near a group of servants. The skirt of the white dress Bill had bought for her fluttered as she moved.

“You'll be able to see him plenty in the woods. I'll have to ask his permission at that time,” Bill bluntly replied. He then began walking. Layla followed behind him, practically running to keep up.

“Does the duke like the woods too?” she asked. “Sure he does. He likes hunting.”

Layla's eyes widened. “Hunting? In the woods?” Bill snorted and looked down at the girl. “Isn't it natural that the woods would be the family's hunting ground?”

“Then... does he hunt birds too?”

“I think bird hunting is the duke's favorite,” Bill casually replied. Layla suddenly stopped walking, shocked by this remark.

Once Bill realized the reason for her reaction, he awkwardly cleared his throat. He thought about telling a lie to comfort her, but he knew it was no use. If he gave her false comfort now, she would be all the more shocked when the duke arrived at the hunting ground within the next few days. Feeling like he needed to say something to comfort her, he said, “You'll be amazed when you see the duke's shooting skills. He's young, but he's an amazing marksman.” As he listened to himself, he realized that this comment might not have been as comforting to her as he had intended. Looking down, he saw that she was already on the verge of tears.

“Why does he hunt birds?” she asked, “There's already so much food in the mansion...”

“Hunting is a recreational activity for nobles. Of all the types of game they hunt, birds and the most fun, and...” Bill caught himself, realizing he had once again said something he shouldn't have.

Layla was staring at him with a shocked expression on her face. Bill started to get frustrated. He didn't like that he needed to be so careful about what he said around this little girl, explaining every last thing to her in order to protect her feelings. He almost shouted, *Why do you like birds so much?!* Ultimately, though, he decided to remain silent. He knew that one more word from him could send her into a fit of crying, and he didn't want to deal with that. He hated crying children. After hesitating for a moment, he continued walking.

Her shoulders slumped, Layla followed behind him with feeble steps. The excitement she had been displaying about her new dress

a moment earlier was gone. The way she had been joyfully prancing about had been quite a sight to see. After a long silence, she looked earnestly up at Bill and cautiously said, “I hope the duke stops enjoying hunting. Do you think that could happen?”

Unsure what to say in response, Bill simply scratched the back of his neck.

Layla began to think that her prayers had been answered. It had been a week since the duke had returned, and he still hadn't visited the hunting ground. This was only natural, given the many guests that had flocked to the mansion to see him.

There were boisterous parties every day in the mansion, but the woods remained quiet. Summer was now in full swing. The eggs that mother birds had been brooding with care were now hatched. The wild rosebuds had blossomed and were now in full bloom. Layla frequently wandered through the forest, overjoyed with all the small changes that were on display.

“Don't go too far, Layla!” Bill shouted one day as Layla once again left the cottage to go exploring. “I won't! I'm just going to the river for a bit! I'll see you later, Uncle!” she replied. She then turned and hurried off into the woods, her arms flailing about as she ran. The old leather bag that she had slung over her shoulder bounced with each step she took.

Once she was deep in the woods, the first thing she looked at was a nest of chickadee hatchlings on a tree branch. The featherless chicks were waiting for their mother to return with their food. She scuttled down the tree and jotted down a description of the baby birds in a small notebook that she kept in her bag. She also tried sketching them as best she could.

She had gotten into the habit of recording everything she saw in the woods in her notebook. The land she was on was more beautiful than anywhere else she had ever been, and she wanted to remember everything. Whenever the day came when she would have to leave the estate, she would be able to open her notebook and enjoy everything she had seen again. This lessened her sadness at the

prospect of having to leave.

As she walked along the path leading to the river, she kept a steady record of all the forest sights. She placed some pretty-colored flower petals between the pages of her notebook, and picked and ate some raspberries from the side of the path. The sun was right overhead when she arrived at the shimmering riverside.

She climbed up a huge tree that stood at the boundary between the forest and the river. This was her favorite tree. Its long branches were so thick, that they were as comfortable to sit on as chairs. Just as she was opening her notebook, she heard the faint sound of horse hooves coming from somewhere beyond the river.

She quickly put her notebook safely back into her bag. Meanwhile, the galloping sound had grown closer. She was scared. She held her breath and hugged the trunk of the tree. A short while later, a horse with sleek brown hair appeared. A man was riding on its back. He came to a stop underneath the very tree that Layla had climbed. His motions were smooth and nimble as he got down from the horse.

Layla felt like climbing down from the tree, but the unfamiliar man was now leaning against it. She felt flustered, unsure of what would be the proper thing to say to him. Meanwhile, the man removed his hat. Just then, the bag she had slung over her shoulder bumped into the branch, making a loud sound. Her memory of what happened next was hazy.

The man reflexively looked up, and Layla saw his face. His blue eyes were like clear marbles, visible through the black hair flowing down over his forehead. By the time Layla had gathered her wits, he had drawn his rifle and now had it pointed at her. The long barrel of the rifle shone menacingly at her.

She remained motionless, still hugging the tree tightly. Her whole body was quivering. As the man watched her, he let out a sigh and slowly lowered his hunting rifle. Twisting his lips, he then asked in a low voice, “Who are you?”

“I'm Layla...” she replied, barely managing to speak without

breaking into sobs. Her golden hair fluttered in the wind blowing from the river.

His eyes narrowed. “What?”

Holding onto the tree so tightly that her hands were hurting, she replied, “Layla. Layla Llewellyn.”

* * *

“Uncle! Uncle Bill! Uncle!” The sound of Layla's breathless cries echoed through the woods as she called to Bill.

Bill was sitting in front of his shed, sharpening the blade of one of his gardening tools. When he heard her desperate cries, he turned his head in bewilderment, only to see her frantically running towards him, her face beet-red. “What's the matter?” he asked. Without waiting to catch her breath, she quickly replied, “There's someone in the woods! A tall man!”

“Sounds like you met the duke while he was out on a hunt,” Bill casually replied as he picked up the next tool to sharpen.

“He had black hair, and blue eyes, his voice was as smooth as a duck's feathers.”

“No doubt about it, that was Duke Herhardt,” Bill replied, chuckling.

Layla stood in place for a while, trying to catch her breath. The good-looking but scary man had stared at her for a while, then turned away without a word. While he was getting back onto his horse, two men who seemed to be his companions had appeared. The man had joined the other men, and the three had gone together further into the woods. Once they were fully out of sight, Layla had scuttled down the tree and fled to the cottage.

“That means that the duke is...” Before Layla could finish her sentence, a loud gunshot rang out, disturbing the stillness of the forest. Startled, Layla turned towards the source of the noise. On the far side of the forest, a bunch of startled birds were flying upward. One of them struggled to ascend, and soon fell down amid the trees. A few more shots rang out.

Bill set down his work and stood up. Layla was frozen stiff, staring at the far side of the forest.

"Layla," he said, patting her on the shoulder. After a long delay, she finally looked up at him. At that moment, Bill found himself holding his breath. The little girl was crying.

* * *

*The slayer of beautiful birds*—this was the title that Layla decided to give Duke Herhardt.

Of course, this was just how she saw him. Everyone else on the estate, Bill included, praised him as a perfect nobleman. With outstanding talents and impressive poise befitting a duke, not to mention a composed and elegant demeanor, everyone seemed to truly love and cherish Duke Matthias von Herhardt. Everyone, that is, but Layla.

The mother chickadee had been missing since the first day the duke had gone hunting. Her frail chicks all lost their lives. Countless other birds disappeared as well.

At first, Layla had wondered why the duke only hunted tiny, beautiful birds, instead of big, edible ones. After pondering over this question for a month, she finally thought she had figured out the answer. For the duke, she realized, birds were a living, moving target. The smaller they were, the more challenging and enjoyable they were to hunt. After shooting one down, he would simply walk away, leaving the dead bird lying there without even glancing at it. On days the duke had gone hunting, Layla would take the cold, bloody birds' bodies and bury them.

*Bang!*

Another shot rang out in the distance.

# Chapter 3:
## Bring That Girl Here

The sun was hot, but the shady area under the trees was breezy and cool. Layla was sitting on a blanket, with her arms wrapped around her knees. Bill and the other gardeners were busy digging up a wilted rose bush and planting late-blooming rose blossoms in the ground.

The garden behind the mansion seemed to have just about every rose variety in the world growing in it. The rose was the national flower of the Berg Empire, and was also the favorite flower of the duke's mother and grandmother.

Earlier that day, after hearing more gunshots echoing from the woods, Layla had felt too agitated to sit still, so she had been anxiously pacing around inside the cottage. When Bill had seen that, he had offered her his hand. Layla had reflexively put her hand in his. He had then taken her out into the garden with him. As the sound of the gunshots had faded away, she had finally calmed down.

*Is it really okay for me to lounge around like this while Uncle Bill is working in the hot sun?* she thought to herself, looking awkwardly at Bill. She then let out a small sigh and closed her eyes.

Bill had told her that he would be in trouble if she tried to help him with his work. He had said that he hated children who didn't do as they were told. Thus, she had no choice but to sit and wait for him to finish, even though she felt guilty.

After reluctantly coming to this conclusion, she opened her eyes again and was startled by what she saw. An unfamiliar boy was standing right in front of her. He was well dressed and looked to be about the same age as her.

As soon as they made eye contact, he smiled and said, “Hello.” He had blond hair and an attractive smile. He glanced around, then solemnly asked, “Do you live here?”

“Yeah. I live with Bill,” she replied, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“Bill? You mean that scary gardener guy?”

“He's not scary.”

The boy tilted his head. “Really? He seems scary to me.” He casually sat down next to Layla. Layla still wasn't sure if she could trust the boy. “Do you live here too?” she asked.

The boy shook his head, chuckling. “No. I came with my dad. He's the Herhardts' family doctor. He came today to give Dowager Herhardt a check-up. Sometimes I come along when he does that. Dowager Herhardt said it was all right.”

“I see,” Layla replied. “How old are you?” the boy asked.

“Twelve.”

“Same as me. But you're so small.” The boy burst into laughter. Layla started blushing slightly. “You're small too,” she said. “Well, I'm the tallest kid in my class,” the boy replied, sitting up as straight as he could. Sure enough, he did look to be taller than the average boy his age.

“Fine, but... you're not as tall as Uncle Bill,” Layla muttered, sounding less confident than before.

The boy stared at her for a moment, then laughed again. He seemed to laugh a lot. “Come on, Bill's a tall guy. No kids are taller than him. I bet there aren't even any grown-ups taller than him.”

“I'm not so sure about that,” Layla replied. Feeling awkward now, she grabbed a handful of grass from the ground next to the blanket, which stained her fingers green. She hoped that the boy would leave soon, but he showed no indication that he would do so. Noticing a peach that she had earlier placed on the edge of the blanket, she impulsively asked, “Want some?”

The boy nodded eagerly. It seemed that he not only laughed easily, but was a generally bold, outgoing person. Layla retrieved a pocket knife from her bag and started cutting up the peach. The boy started snickering. “You're really funny. I can't believe a girl would have a knife in her bag.”

“Uncle Bill gave it to me. Don't tease me,” she replied, scrunching her nose at the boy. She then handed him a peach half. The sweet smell of the peach's flesh wafted in the space between them.

“Why do you look so downcast?” he asked, after finishing his half of the peach. “Is something the matter?”

“The duke and his friends keep hunting birds,” she gloomily replied. The boy looked puzzled. “What's wrong with that?”

“They're killing birds for fun.”

“Isn't that the whole point of hunting? To kill things for fun?”

She raised her green eyes and stared solemnly at him. “Do you do that too?”

The boy looked like he would barely be able to lift a hunting rifle.

“Uh... well... no,” he replied. After a moment, he shook his head vigorously and firmly said, “No, I don't. I feel sorry for the poor animals.” Hearing this, the sullen look on Layla's face slowly transformed into a smile. In a cheery tone, she asked, “Want another peach?” Once again, the boy nodded eagerly. Layla cut the second peach very unevenly, and gave the larger half to the boy. The boy's cheeks reddened slightly. He seemed slightly uncomfortable in his semi-formal clothes. Suddenly, a voice could be heard in the distance. “Kyle! Kyle!”

The boy, who had already eaten his second piece of peach and was now fiddling with the pit, bolted up as soon as he heard the voice. “I have to go now.”

“All right. Bye.”

“Kyle Ettman,” the boy said, extending his hand towards her. “That's my name. What's yours?”

“I'm Layla. Layla Llewellyn,” she replied, clumsily accepting his hand in hers.

The two children exchanged a serious handshake, despite the fact that their hands were sticky with peach juice. “Bye, Layla. I'll see you later. Next time, I'll bring the snack!” he shouted, looking back at her as he ran off.

Layla thought about telling him that they might not see each other again because she might be moving away soon, but then she changed her mind and just waved meekly at him. She didn't like talking about that possibility out loud. Doing so always filled her with anxiety.

Now that Kyle had left, Layla's world was once again peaceful. She sat in the rose-scented breeze, waiting for Bill to finish his work. Eventually, she dozed off. When she heard Bill calling her name, she cracked her eyes open and saw that the long summer day was already coming to an end.

She jumped to her feet, grabbed her bag, and picked up the blanket. She scampered over to Bill, looking much more carefree than she had been earlier. “Uncle, I just met this kid, and...” Before she could finish telling him about the boy with whom she had shared the peaches, she saw the silhouettes of people walking out of the far side of the woods. She froze.

It was Duke Herhardt and his friends.

* * *

Matthias paused in the middle of the rose garden. He saw the gruff gardener Bill Remmer bowing his head towards him. Shortly thereafter, he noticed that there was a small child hiding behind him. “It's been a long time, Mr. Remmer,” he said, nodding back at him. The rest of the hunting group stopped a moderate distance behind Matthias.

“This kid is going to be staying here at Arvis for the time being,” Bill said, with an awkward look on his face. He then patted Layla on the back, and she tentatively stepped out into the open.

When Matthias saw her shimmering blonde hair, he recognized her immediately. It was the girl that had been up in the tree, whom he had mistaken for a bird and almost shot.

“I already got permission from Lady Elise and Dowager Herhardt, but I should have asked you as well,” Bill said, bowing his head again. Layla, who was standing next to him, followed his lead and

bowed as well.

Matthias slowly looked down. When he made eye contact with the girl, she flinched, but didn't look away. He saw her narrowed eyes and her tightly shut lips. It was the same expression she had looked at him with when they had first met in the woods.

“You're that girl. The girl who lives in the woods,” said Matthias's cousin Riette, chuckling.

Layla started blushing and hid behind Bill again. She was acting the same way she did whenever she saw the hunting group in the woods. She always glared at them, then hid behind a tree. Once they finished hunting, she would find the dead birds and bury them, sobbing the whole time.

“Ah, yes, that's fine, Mr. Remmer,” Matthias said, smiling. He didn't care if the gardener wanted to take care of a child. “Thank you, Your Grace,” Bill replied, bowing once again. Matthias gave the slightest nod in return, then started walking again.

Only once they started to leave did Layla lift her head. The duke's relatives and friends were following behind him. Because of the hot weather, they had all taken off their coats and rolled up their sleeves. Only Duke Herhardt himself had kept on his complete hunting outfit. The only exception was his cap, which he had removed and was carrying in his hand.

There were servants following behind the main group. Layla watched them intently. She backed away in shock when she saw that they were carrying not only the hunting rifles, but also a number of animal carcasses. The sharp smell of blood filled her nostrils. She hunched her shoulders and shut her eyes.

Noticing that she was quivering, Bill patted her on the shoulder. It was an awkward but kindhearted gesture.

* * *

With her chin resting on her hand, Claudine let out a series of exaggerated sighs. Her curly brown hair flapped along with each sigh.

Countess Brandt frowned at her daughter and whispered, “Claudine, please behave like a lady.” Her voice was full of impatience.

Even though Claudine was still too young to be called a lady, circumstances demanded that she behave like one. Realizing how impossible this seemed for her daughter, Countess Brandt let out a long sigh. “I'm so lonely and bored,” Claudine grumbled.

The other noblewoman sitting at the tea table looked at her. Blushing with embarrassment at her daughter's childishness, Countess Brandt replied, “Then go play with the boys.”

However, Claudine didn't budge. “They treat me like I'm not even there, and they say things I can't understand.” Claudine's pitiful expression drew soft giggles from the noblewomen.

“Well, It's natural that she would be bored. She doesn't have any friends her age,” said Elise von Herhardt with a nod as she petted the puppy sitting on her lap.

“See, Mom? Lady Herhardt gets it!” Claudine exclaimed, delighted that someone was siding with her. She then turned to the garden. After a moment she pointed and asked, “Who's that girl over there?”

The noblewoman looked in the direction she was pointing, and saw a small girl following behind the gardener as he tended to the roses.

“Can I play with her?” Claudine asked. “She looks like she's about my age.”

“I don't know, Claudine, isn't she an orphan from a foreign country? That's not the kind of child you should be making friends with,” Countess Brandt replied.

“But I don't mind, Mom. I'm sure she'll be more fun to play with than a puppy,” Claudine replied in a calm, confident tone beyond her years. Countess Brandt was now blushing so much that even her ears were red. Elise von Herhardt laughed delightedly and rang the bell to summon a maid. “Bring that girl here. The one the gardener is taking care of.”

* * *

The maid brought Layla into an unfamiliar world, a world where glamorous people dressed in bright, candy-colored clothing were sitting under a white awning that fluttered in the breeze.

“Oh my, what a cute little girl,” said an incredibly beautiful noblewoman. Turning from Layla to the brown-haired girl sitting there, she asked, “What do you think, Claudine? Do you like her?”

The girl who had just been addressed as “Claudine” smiled and nodded, saying, “Thank you, Lady Herhardt.”

Layla started to feel dizzy amidst this conversation that she didn't understand. She desperately wanted to return to Uncle Bill's cottage, but no one was showing any interest in how she felt. A noblewoman who Layla guessed was the duke's mother said something to a maid.

The maid who had brought Layla from the garden passed her off to the other maid, who then led her away. Layla still had no idea what was going on. Finding herself in the first luxurious bathroom she had ever seen, Layla took a bath, and then put on an amazingly soft, white dress that she had been provided. As the maid combed her tangled hair, it hurt a lot, but she bit her lip and endured it. She was worried that if she complained or got upset, it could spell trouble for Uncle Bill.

“Miss Claudine is Count Brandt's daughter. You'd better behave yourself in front of her. Got it?” warned the maid who had brought Layla up to the mansion's second floor.

Layla nodded reflexively. The maid then slowly opened door to the drawing-room. Claudine greeted them, acting as adult-like as she could. “Hello. What's your name? How old are you?” She lowered her head and looked into Layla's eyes.

“My name is Layla Llewellyn, Miss. I'm twelve years old.”

“Really? You're so small, I thought you were younger than me.”

This was Layla's least favorite thing to hear, but she kept silent. She repeated the phrase *For Uncle Bill* over and over again in her mind. This gave her extra patience. Claudine seemed not to think it

necessary to introduce herself. She simply turned and started walking away. Layla stiffly followed behind her.

Claudine suggested several activities for the two of them to partake in, including playing piano, singing songs, and making paper flowers. Layla shook her head. She didn't know how to do any of those things. Claudine gave her some more options, including dice games, word games, and chess. Layla didn't know how to play those games either.

Claudine looked back and forth between the toy-covered table and Layla. “Poor you,” she said, smiling tenderly. She then let out a disappointed sigh and slowly stood up. Layla felt an extreme sense of helplessness as she regarded the unfamiliar items on the table. Claudine walked in front of Layla's chair and lamented, “You don't know a thing.”

Layla could tell that Claudine was trying to speak as gently as she could, without letting her frustration or irritation through. This only made Layla feel more humiliated. She felt like she should respond, but she didn't know what the proper thing to say was in this situation.

Luckily, Claudine simply turned away from her without waiting for a response. Before exiting the room, she sighed and muttered, “I can't believe it. She's no better than a puppy.”

Layla was left by herself in the lavish drawing-room. She felt like leaving right away, but she decided to stay. The other girl might return, after all. However, even as the bright afternoon sunlight ripened into a deep, golden hue, Claudine didn't return.

By the time the maid who had brought Layla there showed up, it was already evening. “You may go now,” she said in a much gentler tone than earlier. “Miss Claudine said that you can keep the dress. And this, too.” She held out a glittering gold coin to her. “Take it. It's proper manners to graciously accept things that your superiors give you. Got it?”

# Chapter 4:
## After All That Time

As the western sky started to turn a deep, rosy hue, Layla stepped out of the mansion. Walking out of the backdoor that connected to the rose garden, she was greeted by a refreshing breeze.

Clutching the gold coin in her right hand, she walked with confident steps. However, her high spirits didn't last long. Claudine was there. She was sitting under the pergola, which was covered with climbing roses in full bloom, having a playful conversation with her cousins. As soon as she saw Layla, the same subtle smile from earlier returned to her face, and she said, “Bye, Layla.”

A few of the young men around her also looked over at Layla. Fortunately, Duke Herhardt was nowhere in sight. Layla bowed rather than saying anything in response. Claudine didn't criticize her for this, which suggested that it wasn't against proper etiquette.

Layla walked with short, quick steps until she was out of their sight, at which point she started running. She couldn't wait to leave this strange, unfamiliar world and return to Uncle Bill's cottage. However, just at the last moment, she suffered her worst misfortune of that day.

As she was crossing the stone-paved boundary between the garden and the forest path, she tripped and fell. The gold coin fell out of her hand and rolled on the pavement, then bumped against the tip of a man's shoe a few paces ahead. She gaped at the coin as it spun in place. The man casually lifted the front of his shoe and stepped on the coin, bringing it to rest.

Layla's eyes moved up from the man's well-polished shoes, to his long legs, finally reaching his face, which was looking down at her. It was Duke Herhardt.

Startled, Layla instinctively sprang to her feet. Her white dress was now stained with dirt and blood from her scraped knee. The duke looked at her calmly. A smile seemed to be breaking through

on the edge of his lips. Keeping her own lips firmly shut, Layla brushed the dirt from her dress.

As she did this, Duke Herhardt took a leisurely step back. The coin that had been under his shoe gleamed, reflecting the light of the sunset. Layla had the urge to run away, but first she wanted to pick up the coin, so she approached the duke. As she was bending over to grab the coin, she suddenly remembered what Claudine had said as she was leaving.

*“She's no better than a puppy.”*

Those words had hurt her deeply. She took the coin and, holding it tightly in her hand, bowed politely to Duke Herhardt. Once she had started to bow, she didn't dare lift her head again. Holding her breath, she kept her head down as low as she could manage. Suddenly she realized that she no longer felt the pain she had felt all over her body from the fall. It was very strange.

She started running again, leaving Duke Herhardt behind. Because her knee hurt, she couldn't run as fast as before, but she didn't stop. She could feel something welling up inside her. She only realized what it was once she had traversed the forest path and saw the light leaking out of the cottage.

It was sadness.

“You can have this, Uncle,” Layla said, suppressing her sadness as she held out the gold coin.

Bill's thick brows slowly wrinkled. “What's that?”

“A gold coin.”

“I know that. Where'd you get it?”

“Miss Claudine gave it to me.”

“Claudine? Ah yes, that young noble girl,” he replied, nodding.

For the two days since Layla had gone inside the mansion, she had been in low spirits.

She hadn't felt like chatting, or even wandering the forest or the garden. Those two days had led Bill to realize how much he had grown accustomed to daily life with the little girl. Now that she had grown quiet, his life had grown quiet. And he didn't much like this

quiet life.

Leaning towards the table where she was sitting, he asked, “But why are you giving that money to me?”

Straightening her posture, she looked straight in his face and replied, “Because I think it's worth a lot.”

“You're right about that.”

“Yeah, so I didn't think I should throw it away, even though receiving it made me feel bad. But I thought if I gave it to you, it could be a small way of repaying you for all you've done for me.”

“Damn it,” he muttered impulsively. Layla flinched, but didn't mind.

The moment he had seen Layla running back from the mansion looking like a mess, he had guessed that something had happened to her that had hurt her deep down inside. He knew what nobles were like. He hadn't asked her about it, because he had worried she would cry if he did. But now it was getting hard to hold back. “Layla?”

When she heard him say her name, the mature expression she had been maintaining gave way to a childlike look again.

“You earned that money, so you should keep it.”

“I earned it?”

“That's right. You earned it by working. You faced a noble girl who was bored to death. It's a lousy job, but you did great at it, so you should proudly accept your payment. It's only right.”

Layla furrowed her brow, feeling perplexed. Bill gulped down his beer as he watched her sink into thought. After a few moments, she tilted her head and, tapping on the coin, asked, “Really?”

“You bet,” he replied, wiping the foam from his beard with his sleeve.

*I earned it. I earned it.* As the thought echoed in her head repeatedly, her face brightened noticeably.

“Welcome to the adult world, Layla,” Bill said, placing a large cut of meat on her plate.

“Adult? Me?”

“If someone can earn a living by their own labor, they're an adult. That's exactly what you did.”

“But all I earned was one single gold coin...”

“There are people in this world several times your age who can barely manage that. You're off to a great start. I'm sure you'll do just fine as an adult.” He filled the remaining space on her plate with bread and roasted vegetables.

Her eyes widened. “Uncle, that's too much.”

“You've been eating like a bird the last couple of days. You need to eat a lot tonight.”

“But...”

“Don't you remember? I like kids who can eat like a cow.”

She burst into laughter. “Uncle, if I eat well, I'll grow a lot, right?”

“Sure. Why do you ask? Did someone call you short?”

“No, I just think I look too young. It bugs me.”

*That's because you are young,* Bill almost replied, before stopping himself. Layla started slicing her meat confidently.

Looking at her, Bill realized that she had grown quite a lot in the few months she had been there. She was no longer as thin as a rail. She looked nice. Her natural frame was small and slender like that of a bird, so she wasn't likely to ever grow to be big and tall. Still, he had no doubt that she would become a beautiful woman one day. This thought suddenly made him uneasy.

For poverty-stricken women, good looks were a dangerous thing, and could easily get them into trouble. He knew he had to send her somewhere he could trust, but could he trust an orphanage? Orphanages seemed like the perfect place to send a child if you wanted to ruin their life.

*Damn this world and all the awful people in it,* he thought. He then finished his beer while internally cursing all the people who had abandoned the girl and left her to him.

He thought back on his earlier life, in which all he had cared about was making sure that the flowers bloomed beautifully and the

fruits ripened deliciously. How had his life come to be full of such worry and anxiety?

"Uncle, if it's my money, I can spend it, right?" Layla asked in between bites of food.

"Of course. Is there something you want?"

"Yeah. I filled up my notebook. I want to buy a new one."

"Then go ahead."

"Do you think I could buy some colored pencils too?"

"Absolutely."

"Is there anything you need, Uncle?"

"Why? Do you want to buy me something?"

"Yes."

"What if I asked you to get me something really expensive?"

"Then I'd save up a bunch of money and buy it for you," she replied with a serious look on her face. When she got serious, her eyes seemed to shine with a darker shade of green, which made her look cutely intelligent.

Bill laughed loudly, then poured himself another drink. He then set down a glass of apple juice in front of Layla. She lifted the glass and gestured for him to clink his glass against hers. He happily obliged. Smiling brightly, she then downed her juice in one gulp. Suddenly, he grew worried that doing this could lead to her becoming a drunkard. Soon, though, he shook his head, thinking, *She's only here temporarily.* He then emptied his glass.

* * *

Over the course of many days, Bill thought about a lot of things. He thought about the reasons why he couldn't keep taking care of Layla. He thought about where would be the best place to send her, that cute but taxing girl who had suddenly appeared in his life one day.

While he was thinking these thoughts, Layla grew a lot. She outgrew her new dresses quickly, her slender legs starting to show. The storage space that he had offered her as a temporary residence

gradually transformed into a cozy room fit for a lady. The sight of her as a young girl jumping about as she frolicked down the forest path was still fresh in his memory, but the person he saw coming back on the same path now was a fully-grown young lady who walked with soft steps as though she were gliding on water.

Sitting on a chair on the porch, Bill stared bemusedly at Layla as she approached. The young lady, who was carrying a wicker basket filled with raspberries, was waving at him. “Uncle! You're home early.” She nimbly ran towards him with dancelike steps.

Her pretty blonde hair was in a French braid that swung under the wide brim of her straw hat. Her slightly flushed cheeks looked as fresh as the high-quality roses he planted.

“You went to the woods again, I see,” he said.

“Yep. Look at the size of this harvest!” she replied, holding up the basket. “I'm going to pick even more tomorrow. I'm going to make so much raspberry jam!”

“You thinking of starting a jam business or something?”

“That's not a bad idea.” Smiling sweetly, she sat down in the chair next to his.

It struck him that he had two chairs on his porch now. And it wasn't just those chairs. Even though he still hadn't made up his mind about what to do with Layla, everything in his cottage was now set up for two people's use.

Layla set the basket on the floor of the porch and began digging through it. Eventually, she pulled out a peach and handed it to Bill. He immediately cut the peach in two and gave half to her. They sat next to each other, gazing into the woods as they shared the peach. The sound of the leaves rustling in the breeze tickled their ears. The sound of birds warbling in the distance was as smooth as Layla's voice.

“It's summer once again,” Bill muttered.

Smiling peacefully, Layla took off her hat and languidly stretched her arms. Bill let out a deep belly laugh when he noticed the old tool bag that was hanging below her knees. He had given it to her

the year she had first arrived. “You're planning to use that piece of junk until it wears away to nothing, aren't you?” he asked.

“I like it because it's comfortable on my shoulder. It's still perfectly usable.” She laughed along with him. Without even trying, Bill knew all of the objects in the bag, just by the rattling sounds they made as she laughed. A tin pencil case. A pocket knife. An old notebook. Some beautiful feathers and flower petals. In some respects, she hadn't changed a bit.

It was an ordinary evening. Bill split firewood while Layla folded and sorted the laundry. Bill fed the chickens and goats while Layla skillfully prepared dinner. By the time they had sat down across the table from each other, the sun had already set.

“Kyle is coming tomorrow. We're going to study together, and then he'll stay for dinner. Is that all right with you?” Layla asked as she placed a delicious-smelling dish on the table.

“Why is that guy always coming to my house to eat all my food when he's got a rich doctor for a father?”

“I know you like him, even though you talk about him like that.”

He snorted. “Maybe a bit.” With a relaxed smile, she set down a half-filled glass of beer in front of him. “What's this? Why is it only half full?”

“For the sake of your health, you should drink less.”

“Did that loafer from the Ettman family tell you that?”

“Uncle!”

“He's a good-for-nothing,” Bill muttered, before resigning himself to his half-filled glass.

* * *

The night grew deeper as they finished their cozy dinner. Layla did the dishes, took a leisurely bath, and returned to her room. Even though she was feeling sleepy, she switched on the lamp and sat at her desk. She had an exam coming up, and she knew she would only be happy that summer if she did well on it.

The nighttime breeze carried the sound of songbirds into her

room, where it was mixed with the sound of her pencil scratching on the page. After spending quite a while in deep concentration, she was overcome by eye strain and a slight headache and had to put down the pencil. Her eyesight, which had never been that good, had gotten much worse recently. Ever since she was young, she had sometimes needed to squint to see clearly. Now she was squinting all the time.

She switched off the lamp and lay down on her bed. *If I just save a little more money, I'll be able to buy eyeglasses. Just twenty jars of raspberry jam. Or maybe thirty? Anyway, I'm almost there.*

She knew that if she were to tell Bill about her eyesight, he would buy eyeglasses for her immediately. But somehow, knowing that made it even harder to say anything to him. She had already received so much from him and didn't have any real way to repay him.

When he had said he was going to send Layla to school, most people had scoffed. They said that there was no point in trying to teach an orphan girl since once she grew up, she could simply become a maid for the Herhardt family. But Bill was determined. He told her every single day that she was going to become an outstanding adult.

When she closed her eyes, her headache subsided slightly. The harder she tried to fall asleep, the more awake she felt. On nights like this, random thoughts would always begin to fill her head: The birds returning. Her summer plans. The culprit in the serial mystery novel that was being published in the daily newspaper. And Duke Herhardt.

When his name came to her mind, her eyes opened. Now that her eyes were adjusted to the dark, she could make out the nighttime scenery outside her window: Tree branches swaying gently in the breeze, and beyond them, the night sky, full of stars and the moon. As she gazed at their pale light, she found herself holding her breath.

After graduating from college, the duke had gone to the Royal

Military Academy, and then been commissioned as an army officer, in keeping with the family tradition. He had been immediately assigned to a post at an overseas war front, so he hadn't visited the estate at all in the previous year. Thus it had been a peaceful time for the birds in the woods, and for Layla. However, he was going to be returning this summer...

The lord of Arvis, Duke Herhardt.

# Chapter 5:
## The Duke Turned Around

Standing in front of Gillis Girls' School, Kyle Ettman looked as natural as the wall or the streetlamps in front of the school. *He's back,* thought the students as they glanced at him with casual interest.

Kyle grinned as he looked through the school's main gate. He saw a young lady in the distance, walking her bicycle in his direction. From her strong, elegant gait, he recognized her immediately.

Well, not just from her gait. Also from her expressive face, and her delicate movements. They all made it clear to him that this was Layla. There were no other girls like Layla. He had known this ever since the summer day when he had first approached that little girl sitting in the shade of a willow tree.

“Layla!”

At the sound of someone calling her name, Layla stopped walking. She squinted her eyes, then started walking again, a little more quickly than before. Kyle loved such moments. Moments when she started walking faster after seeing him, approaching him with a smiling face.

“Why did you come here?” she asked. “Wouldn't it have been easier just to meet me at the cottage?”

“Well, the school is on my way home anyway,” he replied. Of course, this was a lie. He had abandoned his friends from the tennis club so that he could walk Layla home from school. Even though his superiors in the club would be waiting for him the next day, holding their rackets like weapons, he didn't worry about that right now. *Tomorrow's problems can be dealt with tomorrow. Let the chips fall as they may.*

The two of them walked side by side down the busy street. As they passed through the shopping district, they bought ice cream cones that they enjoyed as they continued to walk. They checked

out a bookstore, full of the vaguely sweet smell of dusty old books. Layla laughed a lot. Other than Bill, Kyle was the only person in the world who knew how much she laughed. Kyle knew this to be true, and it made him happy.

The breeze became much cooler after they turned onto the road leading into Arvis. When their conversation shifted to exams, Layla's face grew serious. This seriousness became tinged with hopelessness when they started talking about geometry.

Kyle noticed these subtle changes in her expression of concern. *Not yet.* He stopped himself from saying the words that were itching to escape his lips. He didn't want to make things awkward between them by confessing his love for her too hastily. He wondered if it was even necessary for them to start dating. Why not just skip straight to marriage? *Layla Ettman. I like the sound of that.*

"Why are you smiling?" Layla asked. She had been grumbling about how her geometry grades weren't improving, when she had suddenly noticed that Kyle was grinning about something.

"Uh... Oh, yeah! So I hear that Duke Herhardt is coming back?" Kyle replied, trying to change the topic quickly. "It's been a really long time. When is he supposed to arrive?"

"I don't know."

"Everyone has been talking about him. Duke Herhardt this, Duke Herhardt that. But you don't seem interested at all."

Layla gripped her bicycle's handlebars tighter. She had never had much contact with the duke, besides occasionally running into him in the woods or passing by him when Claudine invited her into the mansion.

Seeing him made her uncomfortable, so she tried to avoid him whenever possible. When she did run into him, she would bow her head as low as possible, so that she wouldn't have to look at him.

She had felt this way ever since that evening back when she was young, when she had tripped and dropped the gold coin at his feet, and he had stepped on it to stop it spinning. It had been Claudine who had invited her into the mansion and then abandoned her,

then given her the coin for her troubles. But it had been the duke who had made her feel just how worthless she was amid that strange, luxurious world.

That experience had left a different kind of scar in her heart than that of the scorn and persecution she had previously endured. She wanted to forget about the encounter, but she was reminded of it every time she saw Duke Herhardt. She hated him. She hated how he always reminded her of that day, of that memory, of that scar.

As she was catching her breath, a black car drove past. Since Dowager Herhardt, the duke's grandmother never rode in cars, it was probably Lady Herhardt, the duke's mother, returning from a social gathering.

“With the duke returning soon, Arvis must be really busy lately,” Kyle remarked.

“Yep.”

“Oh yeah. Layla, do you think I should try becoming an officer too?” Kyle was now walking backwards, facing Layla as they continued down the road. “I could become an officer like Duke Herhardt, and maybe I'd be awarded a medal. Captain Ettman, a brilliant sniper able to put a bullet straight through an enemy soldier's heart!” He laughed impishly as he mimed firing a sniper rifle.

“Excuse me, Mr. Ettman. You can't even kill a chicken,” Layla replied, snickering.

Kyle's self-confidence took a hit, but he couldn't dispute her point. She was referring to something that had happened around the same time the previous year. Kyle had insisted on paying for the meals he had eaten in the cottage by helping out with chores, so Bill had asked him to catch a chicken for them to cook for dinner. Kyle had boldly marched out to the chicken coop to catch one, but in the end, he hadn't managed to catch so much as a single feather. From that day forth, Bill had called Kyle by the degrading nickname “loafer.”

“You're my kind friend Kyle Ettman. That's why I like you,” Layla

said, giggling as she looked at Kyle's frowning face. “I'd prefer it if you used your hands to save people, rather than to shoot them.”

“Well... of course. I'm going to become a doctor.” Kyle awkwardly put his hand to his cheek. “Should I become a medical officer, then? Do they give medals to medical officers?

“They'd probably give you one if you saved a lot of people, right? That's a much better accomplishment than killing a lot of people.”

“You think so?”

As they continued to talk playfully, they came to a fork in the road. The Ettman residence was at the end of the road on the left.

“Ah! I forgot to bring the geometry notes I told you I'd lend you,” Kyle exclaimed.

“Then why don't you head home for now, and come to the cottage at dinner time? But don't forget the notes.”

“Hey, will you be looking forward to seeing me, or the notes?”

“The notes,” she boldly replied, before bursting into mischievous laughter. Also laughing, Kyle started running towards his home.

Layla yelled after him, “There's no need to rush! I've still got to make dinner!”

Kyle shouted even more loudly in response, saying, “Don't worry about it! I'll come over when I feel like it!” Layla shook her head, knowing that it was no use trying to change his mind. She then got on her bicycle and started riding towards Platanus Road, which led to the Arvis mansion.

* * *

Matthias had the car stop at the end of the mansion's driveway, far from the mansion. The chauffeur and the butler looked flustered.

Duke Herhardt's arrival had been sudden. After news had hit that he would be arriving a week earlier than originally scheduled, the Arvis staff had been busily working from dawn to dusk, preparing for his arrival. As a result, only two people had been sent out to pick him up. And now the duke had sprung this surprise on them.

Hessen, the butler, gulped nervously and said, “Master, there's still-”

“I'm going to walk around for a bit,” Matthias calmly said, cutting Hessen off. The chauffeur wavered for a moment, then rushed to get out of the car and open the rear passenger door.

“No,” Matthias said, shaking his head at Hessen, who had started to follow him out of the car. “I'll see you in the mansion.” He smiled at Hessen and then turned and started walking away.

Hessen hesitated uncertainly for a moment, then followed his master's order and got back into the car. The chauffeur also hurried back into the driver's seat. After they drove off, the road was quiet again. Clutching his officer's cap loosely in one hand, Matthias sauntered around under the shade of the trees. The click of his boots blended pleasingly with sound of the leaves swaying in the breeze.

Matthias von Herhardt had been the perfect child, the perfect student, and had become the perfect officer. Now he would soon be marrying the perfect woman and would then become the perfect husband and the perfect father. This incessant series of perfections had come so naturally, that the whole process had started to bore him.

He slowed his pace a bit. A beam of light streaming through a gap in the leaves fell on his eyes, accentuating the slight redness at their edge. As he walked a little further, the beam descended and illuminated his golden belt buckle and the badges on the breast of his slate-gray uniform.

*“You need to get engaged this summer.”*

Matthias had readily gone along with his mother's wishes. It was his duty to get married at the proper time and father an heir.

*“I believe that Claudine is the most suitable candidate to be the next duchess.”*

He had also accepted his grandmother's opinion with good grace. Claudine von Brandt was a well-qualified prospective bride with an excellent pedigree. Matthias had never desired anything. He hadn't

had the opportunity—before he ever had the chance to desire something, it had already been given to him. Desire itself was an alien concept to him. So was marriage.

He aimed for a perfect marriage. A marriage that served as a steppingstone to stabilize his world, without involving needless emotions. Claudine von Brandt seemed like the best fit for that kind of arrangement, and that was enough for him. He wasn't particularly interested in her in any other respect. He didn't feel the need to be.

He stopped walking for a moment in the middle of the road. He looked up, and rays of broken sunlight dazzled his eyes. It was then that he sensed the presence of another person nearby

He looked around with narrowed eyes, and soon saw a young lady riding towards him on a bicycle. He remained standing in place, and soon she passed by him on his left. Her golden hair rippled in the breeze.

*Layla Llewellyn?*

As the name popped into his mind, the young lady turned her head towards him. When she saw him, her green eyes widened. As she continued to ride while locking eyes with him, she lost her balance and the bicycle toppled over. The sound of her screams followed immediately. The front wheel of the upside-down bicycle continued to spin.

Matthias walked up to the young lady on the ground. Under his shadow, she lifted her head. There was no mistaking it, she was Layla Llewellyn, the little girl who was crazy about birds.

“I'm sorry, Your Grace,” she quickly said, bowing her head. She seemed to be waiting for him to go on his way. Matthias was about to leave when he changed his mind and casually looked down at Layla. Her school uniform was covered with dirt. Her stockings were ripped, and her knees were bleeding. Silence descended as the bicycle wheel slowed to a stop.

Layla looked up at Matthias with squinted eyes. She had her usual, plucky expression, and yet there was something gentle in her

look.

*Looks like that girl has grown up as well,* he thought. While it was natural that she would have grown along with the passage of time, seeing her was giving him a strange feeling. In his mind, she had always remained a little girl. A little girl who had gotten on his nerves by always trying to avoid him. But the Layla Llewellyn he saw before him now didn't match the little girl he remembered at all.

The soft curve of her body underneath the thin fabric of her summer school uniform was nothing like that of the scrawny little girl. Nor were her bright lips and cheeks, or the soft scent being wafted by the breeze from her body.

This realization gave Matthias a strange sense of uneasiness as Layla struggled to get up. She took a step backward to fix her shoes, then brushed the dust off her uniform. Although she was now fully grown, she was still quite short, barely reaching his chin when she stood up straight.

“Layla Llewellyn,” Matthias said impulsively.

Layla flinched and hunched her shoulders.

Her head was still bowed. “I'm sorry, Your Grace,” she said, then repeated the apology several more times as she crouched down to pick up her belongings, which were strewn about his feet—her bag, her books, her notebook.

Matthias's gaze followed her hands, which were soiled with dirt and blood until her finger brushed against a pen. He took a step forward and leisurely placed his foot on top of the pen. At this, Layla finally looked up at him. She looked irritated.

“Layla Llewellyn,” he said once again. “I'm talking to you.” He was speaking in a relaxed manner, just like the relaxed way he had stepped on the pen.

She shut her eyes tightly and opened them again. “Yes, Your Grace?” She looked like she was waiting for the chance to snatch the pen back, but Matthias didn't move.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I'm listening.” Her voice was full of

confidence even though her body was trembling. Her green eyes, which resembled the summer forest, twinkled with anger and embarrassment.

The memory of him smiling as he stepped on the gold coin, all those years ago, flashed into her mind. He had been looking at her with the same expression that day as he was now. Finally, he laughed quietly to himself and casually walked past her. He placed his cap on his head and started strolling down the road again as if nothing had happened.

She stared at his back as he walked away. *Why was he acting that way if he didn't actually have anything to say?* she wondered, squeezing the pen in her hand. *Would the residents of Arvis believe that Duke Herhardt, the man they praise as the perfect nobleman, would do something like that? I'd bet all the money I've saved up for eyeglasses that they wouldn't. They'd call me crazy.*

With her lips shut tight, she quickly set her bicycle upright again, then thoroughly wiped off the pen and placed it in her bag. She started walking her bicycle down the road, following behind Duke Herhardt, who was walking quite slowly. Her skinned knees stung. Even though she was sure that he wouldn't look back, she maintained a good posture as she walked. It hurt a lot to walk without limping, but she endured the pain.

*I sure wish he'd put those long legs of his to good use and pick up the pace.*

She was about to let out an irritated sigh when the duke turned around. A gentle breeze was blowing through the leaves, causing the broken sunbeams to slowly undulate on the summer road.

Startled, Layla froze, forgetting even to avert her eyes. Matthias's gaze slowly moved down her long, loose hair. It passed by her chest, which was gently rising and falling, and her white hands, which were gripping the handlebars of her bicycle. It came to rest on her amazingly slender ankles and her tiny feet.

It then returned to her eyes. He gazed tranquilly at those clear, green eyes for a long while. Layla Llewellyn was still an orphan

living for free on his estate, but one key fact had changed everything. As time passed, the little girl had grown up. As this fact dawned on him, he finally saw Layla for who she was now.

She was no longer a little girl. She was now a young lady.

# Chapter 6:
## Canary

On the surface, Claudine von Brandt's visit to Arvis was treated as a standard early-summer visit to a relative's estate. However, everyone knew that there was another reason for her visit.

The two families were meeting to negotiate details and grow closer before the engagement was publicly announced. This goal was clear to all, and no one tried to conceal it, least of all Claudine herself.

“Hello, Duke Herhardt,” Claudine said, curtsying to Matthias with perfect etiquette.

Matthias saw no trace of the young, immature cousin he remembered from years earlier. “Welcome, Lady Claudine,” he replied, bowing in response to her curtsy. It was as if he were greeting a lady he had just met for the first time. They exchanged graceful smiles.

There was nothing much new or surprising for them to discuss. They had never been particularly close, but they knew each other fairly well after seeing each other countless times over the years. They knew that each of them, Matthias von Herhardt and Claudine von Brandt both, were nobles to the core. This was the biggest and most straightforward reason why they had chosen each other.

Matthias deftly escorted Claudine to the greenhouse attached to the back side of the mansion. His mother, Elise von Herhardt, had asked the servants to prepare their afternoon tea in the greenhouse, because she knew how much Claudine liked it.

“I'm always struck by the beauty of this greenhouse. It's as if Lady Herhardt borrowed a bit of heaven and is storing it in here,” Claudine joyfully remarked after taking a sip of tea and setting her cup down without a sound. She was speaking in the cheerful yet restrained manner expected of a young noblewoman.

“I've put my heart and soul into selecting and arranging

everything in here. I'm looking forward to passing it on to a lady of the house who will appreciate its value," Elise softly replied.

Hearing this, Countess Brandt looked proudly at her daughter. Claudine smiled modestly, saying nothing in response.

"Matthias, you should give Claudine a tour of Arvis's heaven," Elise whispered to her son as the teatime was drawing to a close.

It seemed that it was time for negotiations to begin between the families. Matthias extended his hand to Claudine, who then lightly placed her hand in his. Gazing down at the young lady's hand, which was inside an elegant white-glove made of translucent lace, Matthias was briefly reminded of Layla's small hands, stained with dirt and blood.

They conversed on suitable topics as they strolled along. A gentle jet of water babbled in the marble fountain that was the centerpiece of the greenhouse. Meanwhile, the clear sound of birdsong brightened the languid afternoon mood.

Claudine observed Matthias out of the corner of her eye. Despite the gentle smile on his face, it was impossible to discern his inner feelings, or his attitude about the world. He had flawless manners, but at his core, he was a man full of arrogance that came from never having had to bow down or submit to anyone in his life. Claudine liked this aspect of him.

"The birds in here are so pretty," she commented, admiring the many colorful birds perched on tree branches in the greenhouse. Matthias hadn't even noticed that there were birds in the greenhouse until Claudine had pointed them out.

His mother, who was still Arvis's lady of the house, loved birds every bit as much as she loved roses. Just as she kept a gardener on staff to tend the roses, she had hired a bird-keeper to look after the birds. Her own role, as she saw it, was to enjoy the products of their work. That was her outlook on life in general—to her the world was a lovely place full of things prepared by others for her enjoyment.

"This one is so obedient. It's remarkable. I wonder what the secret is," Claudine exclaimed, smiling at the small bird that had

just landed on her extended hand.

Matthias glanced around the greenhouse and realized that the birds in it were incredibly docile. The windows were wide open, and yet none of them were flying away. They were content to remain in the peaceful world of the greenhouse, singing beautiful melodies.

He watched a parrot shuffle along its perch, then looked at the finch warbling as it sat on Claudine's hand. He turned and made a gesture to the bird-keeper who was politely standing in wait nearby. The gray-haired man quietly approached and stood beside Claudine, then explained, “I clip the birds' wings, Miss. That makes it so that they can't fly very far, so that they won't escape. It also makes them more obedient. Birds capable of flying freely are almost impossible to tame.”

“You clip their wings?” she asked. “Doesn't that hurt them?”

“No, it's just their feathers, so it doesn't hurt. It's good for them, in fact, because it keeps them from flying away and getting lost or injured. If you're interested, I could show you how I do it.”

“Would that be all right, Duke Herhardt?” she asked excitedly.

“As you wish, My Lady,” Matthias readily replied.

The bird-keeper then led them to a very large birdcage at one end of the greenhouse. It contained young birds that hadn't yet had their wings clipped. He reached in and retrieved a bright-yellow bird, the most beautiful bird of the bunch, and brought it to his worktable.

“What kind of bird is that?” Matthias asked.

“It's a canary, Your Grace. It's a songbird that sings beautifully.” The bird-keeper proceeded to place a small handkerchief over the bird's head, and used one hand to gently spread apart the feathers of one of its wings. With his other hand, he picked up a small pair of scissors and immediately made a few quick clips. The feathers fluttered down onto his worktable. He did the same to the other wing and then set the bird down.

The canary flapped its wings desperately, but was only able to fly

a short distance before flopping down on the ground. Still not accepting that it could no longer fly, it tried a few more times, with the same result.

Matthias reached down and picked up the bird from the edge of the flowerbed. The bird squirmed in his hand and started to cry, making sounds closer to shrieks than to song.

“They don't become tame right away, Your Grace. It takes time for them to get used to having clipped wings,” the bird-keeper said as Matthias handed him back the canary, which he then gently stroked to calm it down.

“Would you like to try doing it yourself, Miss?” the bird-keeper asked Claudine.

“No, just seeing it is enough for me. Thank you for satisfying my curiosity.” She then turned away. “Let's go back to the tea-table,” she said, extending her hand to Matthias. Once again, as Matthias looked at her smooth, beautiful hand, his mind flashed back momentarily to the image of Layla's dirty, bloody hands.

Before they walked away from the bird-keeper, Matthias gave him an impulsive command. “Bring that to my bedroom.”

“Pardon...?” the bird-keeper asked, looking surprised.

“That bird,” Matthias replied, glancing with narrowed eyes at the bird. “My canary.”

* * *

Layla put her neatly combed blonde hair into a ponytail. She then put on her apron and grabbed her big basket. “I'd better finish it today,” she muttered to herself with a serious look on her face.

Not only had Duke Herhardt returned, but Lady Claudine had come to visit Arvis a few days earlier. This had made Layla feel more pressed for time. She needed to gather enough raspberries before the duke started venturing into the woods, and before Lady Claudine started summoning her. Luckily, she hadn't seen much of either of them yet. Presumably this was because they were busy planning their engagement.

With the wide brim of her straw hat pulled low, she took off, walking quickly towards the woods. The raspberry bushes were covered with berries. No matter how many raspberries the residents of Arvis and the forest animals ate, there were always so many left over that countless berries would become overripe and fall to the ground.

Diligently making her way from bush to bush, she had already filled her basket before noon. Her heart felt light as a feather with joy, even though the basket was so heavy that it felt like the arm she was holding it with was going to fall off.

She tossed the basket in the shade of a tree and dashed over to the river, where she thoroughly rinsed her hands to remove all traces of raspberry juice from them. She washed her face as well.

The Schulter River wrapped around the Herhardt estate's forest and ravine. There was a decent view of the river from downtown, but the best place from which to view it was Arvis, where the Herhardt estate was located. The way the Arvis forest blended with the shimmering water of the river was breathtakingly beautiful.

Layla took a handkerchief from the pocket of her apron and used it to dry her face. The water of the river, which stayed cool even in the summer, felt very refreshing. She thought about dipping her feet in the water, but then shook her head.

In her aunt's house, the first place she had been sent as an orphan, there had been five cousins older than her. They were very rough and mischievous. One day they had grabbed the young Layla and thrown her into a river. They had said that this was a hazing ritual that she would have to go through if she wanted to live there. If a neighbor hadn't heard her screams and rescued her, she might have drowned and become a water spirit.

Even though it had clearly been her cousin's fault, Layla had been the one beaten by her drunken aunt that night. And only a few weeks later, her aunt had sent her off to the next relative's home, saying that she couldn't take care of a child who didn't behave.

This had felt unfair to Layla, but she didn't mind it once she

realized that the next home was an improvement over the first one. She felt the same way about the following home, and the one after that. Considering that she had ultimately ended up at Bill's cottage, it seemed that she was right, *things had improved*.

With a bright smile on her face, she walked back over to the tree where she had set down her basket. She retrieved the newspaper that she had stuck in the basket and put it in the pocket of her apron, then started quickly climbing up the tree. She wasn't as quick or nimble as she had been as a child, but she knew more tricks for getting around cleverly now. Bill had taught them to her.

She skillfully took her place on a branch that was as snug and cozy as a comfortable chair. Looking down at the Schulter River, she was certain that it was the most beautiful river in the world. Kyle, who had traveled to many different cities, agreed with her, which she felt established her opinion as an objective fact.

She gazed intently at the waterfowl diving into the dappled surface of the river for fish, and at the dense foliage on either side of the river. This lovely scenery made her look forward to the rest of the summer. Even considering the added element of Duke Herhardt, she knew that this summer would be just as beautiful a season as ever.

She then took the newspaper from her apron pocket and opened it to the page where the next installment of the mystery novel was printed. The detective was about to figure out the culprit by using his impressive intellect. She started reading with gusto.

* * *

Matthias came up for air after remaining underwater for a considerable length of time. His prominent Adam's apple rose and fell quickly as he caught his breath. His wet, sturdy body looked nice alongside the trees reflected in the river. He had been about to head back to the mansion, but then he changed his mind and started swimming in the direction of the current.

He loved the Schulter River and the Arvis forest. He had had the

boathouse next to the dock converted into a cabin, from which the entire view could be taken in at once. His grandmother and mother rarely visited the riverside, so that area was a private world that he had to himself.

When there were no guests at the mansion, he would often visit the cabin, where he would gaze at the scenery out the window, read a book, or simply take a nap. It was a nice place to be no matter what he was doing. His favorite thing of all about that place was the feeling of submerging his body into the water, as he was doing now.

Floating on his back, he gazed up at the green tree branches, and the blue sky peeking through them. The sound of the flowing water blended with the sound of the leaves swishing in the breeze and the birds chirping. The mansion had been full of noisy activity for the past few days, which made him all the more able to appreciate the calm stillness of the river.

The marriage negotiation process between the Herhardt and Brandt families had gone smoothly. If there were no unforeseen incidents, his engagement to Claudine would be announced before the end of the summer.

The Brandt family had proposed a one-year engagement period, and Matthias had agreed to it. If he could earn enough honor as Duke Herhardt, there was no need for him to continue his duties as a military officer for very long. Spending one or two more years as an imperial guard before being discharged and getting married sounded just right. After that, he planned to devote all his attention to the affairs of his family. His life with his new family would flow gently along like the water of this river.

With his eyes closed, he let his body sink down into the water again. At that moment, he felt like the warm sunlight, the cool water, and the sound of the water splashing near his ears were all there was to this world. However, when he opened his eyes again, this perfect tranquility was broken.

There was a woman sitting on a branch of a large tree by the

river. In an instant, he knew who she was. Just then, she folded the newspaper she had been reading and turned in his direction.

Sure enough, it was that annoying girl, Layla Llewellyn.

# Chapter 7:
## Something Scarier Than That

At first, Layla thought that she was seeing things. This happened to her sometimes. Since her eyesight was so poor, she would occasionally see a piece of fruit that had fallen on the forest path and mistake it for a squirrel or would be startled by a log floating in the water that she mistook for a person.

But in this case, the form she saw in the water was unmistakably human. She could tell it was a man. A tall man without any clothes on. Once his wet, black hair came into her view, she had to abandon the idea that she was seeing things.

There was no mistaking it. What she saw floating in the river was not an object, it was Duke Matthias von Herhardt.

She dropped the newspaper in shock. It fluttered down to the ground below. If she hadn't instinctively held onto the trunk of the tree, she would have followed right behind the newspaper. An inner voice started to guide her. *Close your eyes. No, get down from the tree and go home. Or at the very least, scream.* But all she could do was stare in shock at the naked man.

It was the same with Duke Herhardt as well. Making no attempt to hide his naked body, he was staring back at Layla as he continued to float on the water.

*Can't he at least float downstream?!* Layla thought. Just then, the duke suddenly turned his body over in the water and started swimming toward the edge of the river near where Layla was.

“N-no!” she shouted, her clear voice reverberating far and wide. “Don't! Don't come this way! You can't!” She hurriedly shuffled down the tree in a panic. She forgot proper etiquette and made no formal greeting to the duke. She also forgot her hat and her basket. She just ran. Her legs carried her down the forest path at an incredible pace. When she had made it about halfway back to the cottage, someone shouted, “Layla!”

Without slowing down, she looked and saw that it was Kyle. Having taken her eyes off the path, she started to stumble. Kyle rushed to catch her before she fell down. “Where have you been?” he asked. “You weren't at the cottage, so I've been looking for you all over.”

“Kyle, Kyle, what should I do?” she muttered in a half-crazed voice as she struggled to breathe.

“Why? What's going on? Did you come across a wild animal or something?”

She shook her head vigorously. Even more puzzled, Kyle looked far down the path in the direction from which she had just come. There was nothing there. The forest was calm and serene as always. “What is it, then?” he asked. “Why are you in such a shock?”

“What should I do...?” she asked. Her eyes started to well up with tears, and she flopped down to sit on the ground. Lifting her apron to cover her face, she shook her head several times in distress. Her mind kept flashing back to what she had seen, even though she didn't want it to. Now clutching her hair, she asked, “What should I do? What should I do, Kyle?”

“I can't answer that until you tell me what happened. So what happened?” he asked, furrowing his brow as he stooped down towards her.

After a moment, she looked up at him. Her face was as red as a well-ripened raspberry. Her lip twitched as if she was about to say something, then more tears formed in her eyes and she buried her face in her apron again.

At this point, Kyle couldn't help but start giggling. “Hey, what the heck did you see? Was it a ghost or something?”

*No, it was something scarier than that,* she wanted to answer. But when she tried to speak, all that came out of her mouth were hot gasps of air.

* * *

Matthias burst into laughter at the scene he had just seen unfold

before him. Water dripped from his hair to the bridge of his nose, where it continued flowing downwards. He swam back to the dock by his cabin, put on his clothes, and then returned to the tree. All the things Layla had had with her were strewn on the ground.

He looked closely at all the items. At the foot of the tree, there was a large basket and a hat. Nearby, there was a newspaper and a wet handkerchief. He chuckled when he saw how many raspberries were in the basket. *Was she trying to wipe out the raspberry species from Arvis?* He couldn't believe that such a petite young lady had been carrying such a large basket around.

It then occurred to him that this tree seemed to be the same tree she had been perched in all those years ago, when he had mistaken her for a bird and almost shot her. He looked up at the broad-trunked tree's upper branches. He could still remember the sight of her little face staring at him from up there. He let out another laugh.

*Don't tell me she still climbs trees for fun.*

He thought about chasing after her, but then changed his mind and started heading back towards the mansion.

That afternoon he had to meet with the family company's board of directors. He wasn't yet directly involved in managing the company, but he would be taking on that responsibility after he was discharged from the military. Therefore, it was important that he gain as full an understanding of the structure and functioning of the company as possible.

Building on their existing land assets, the Herhardt family had greatly expanded the scope of their business dealings, both in terms of trade and natural resources. The immense wealth the family now possessed had been amassed mostly by Matthias's grandfather, who had made the bold choice to invest in oil in the New World.

All the honor and power that the family had gained since that time would now fall to Matthias. Fully aware of this, he considered upholding this honor and properly wielding this power to be his most important duty as duke. He was confident that he could fulfill

that duty better than anyone else. This was a conviction that he had never doubted, even for a moment.

After arriving back at the mansion, he went straight to his bedroom, where he changed his clothes and combed his messy hair. Once he had finished getting ready, he lounged in the chair by the window on the west side of the bedroom. There was still about an hour left before the meeting. Deciding that an hour was too long a time to waste away doing nothing, he was about to rise from the chair and leave the room, when he heard a chirping sound.

He looked in the direction the sound was coming from, and saw that the canary in the birdcage on the table was singing. Ever since that bird had been brought to his room, it had been so quiet, he had thought that it didn't know how to sing. But hearing its beautiful song now, he realized how wrong he had been.

He walked over to the cage and opened its door. The canary stopped singing, then flapped its clipped wings and managed to escape from the cage.

Deciding not to leave his bedroom after all, Matthias leaned against the windowsill and watched the bird. It was incredibly active for such a small thing. It tried to fly, then fell. Then it tried again and fell again. It continued bouncing around the room in this manner without rest for quite a while.

Eventually, it seemed to have tired itself out, and it gently perched on the armrest of the chair. Matthias picked it up so that he could put it back in its cage. Rather than struggling and shrieking as it had done previously, the canary obediently entrusted itself to his gentle grip.

Intrigued by this shift in the bird's attitude, Matthias tried placing it on his finger. To his surprise, it didn't try to fly away, but just sat up calmly and stared back at him, unafraid.

* * *

“I feel like I'm gazing into a new world,” Layla whispered in a daze.

The gray-haired optician let out a friendly chuckle. “Considering how bad your eyesight was, I can believe it. It must’ve been quite hard for you.”

“No, it wasn't too bad, other than when I was trying to read,” she cheerfully replied as she took off the glasses and put them on again. When she did so, the blurry world miraculously became clear. She still hadn't gotten over her amazement at this.

She had turned the heaps of raspberries she had gathered from the forest into jam, which she had then sold. As soon as she had saved up enough money to purchase eyeglasses, she had ridden her bicycle into the city. She had no trouble locating the optician's shop, because she had gazed longingly into its window many times before.

After chatting with the optician a bit more, she left the shop. The incredibly clear world around her seemed new and wondrous.

With each step she took, she discovered another detail of this new world. She was filled with love and gratitude for the wild raspberries growing in the Arvis forest that had enabled this. She also felt proud of herself for all the hard work she had put in, not only picking them, but also standing in front of a hot stove, stirring the jam until her arm felt like it was going to fall off.

*But why, at such a wonderful time as this, do those indecent memories keep flashing into my mind?* she thought, frowning as she tried to clear her mind of the memory of when she had unintentionally seen the duke's naked body.

She had been so flustered and frightened that day, she had waited until dusk to go fetch her basket. By that point in the evening, the forest was quiet, and the river was flowing calmly. The stillness of the area finally brought her relief, and she grabbed her hat and basket and went on her way. However, her cheeks still felt hot. She was so distracted, she didn't even feel the weight of the full basket in her arms. After that day, she had felt awkward around men, including even Bill and Kyle.

*Even if it's his land, why would the duke swim naked in broad*

*daylight?*

She shook her head to try to rid herself of the unpleasant memory.

*I'd better not go back to the river until the duke leaves Arvis again.*

Having made this resolution, she started walking again, when she heard a familiar voice.

“Layla...?”

The loud, high-pitched voice sounded just like that of Claudine von Brandt.

*Oh my. The time has come.* Layla paused for a moment to catch her breath, and, putting on a polite smile, she slowly turned around.

However, much to her surprise, the person she saw was none other than the man who had been causing her mind so much distress, *Duke Herhardt.*

He was standing right there, in the midst of this newly-clear world. She was so startled that it took her a moment to notice Claudine standing next to him. Claudine had stopped visiting Arvis while Duke Herhardt had been away serving in the military, so Layla hadn't seen her in a long time. During that time, Claudine had transformed into a perfect noblewoman.

Layla politely curtsied, and the other two gracefully nodded back at her. “Since when have you worn glasses? I almost didn't recognize you,” Claudine said. Layla had hoped that they would have simply walked on without saying anything, but now she had no choice but to continue smiling politely at Claudine, while being careful not to look at Duke Herhardt at all.

“Have you been well?” Claudine asked, looking closely at Layla with narrowed eyes.

“Yes, Miss.”

“We were just on our way to have some tea,” Claudine said, smiling as she glanced over at the hotel across the street. Layla deliberated over the proper response. *Should I say, “Yes, Miss”...? Or maybe, “Is that so, Miss?”*

Before Layla had a chance to say anything, Claudine took mercy on her and said, “You should come along with us, Layla.”

“Pardon?”

“It's been so long since we've seen each other, I'd love to have a cup of tea with you. Is that all right with you, Duke Herhardt?”

Matthias smiled subtly to indicate his consent. Layla noted to herself that Claudine hadn't asked if it was all right with *her*. This was nothing new, of course.

Matthias and Claudine continued walking. Their attendants, who had been waiting nearby, followed behind them. Layla let out a sigh and turned her bicycle around. The creaking of her worn-out wheels blended with the clicking of the nobles' expensive shoes.

# Chapter 8:
## A Safe World

The doorman looked very flustered.

Layla nodded to him, as if she understood that his surprise was due to the fact that this hotel, the finest hotel in the city, was not the type of place where people with ratty old bicycles would normally come.

The doorman looked warily at Layla, then glanced at Duke Herhardt and Claudine, then back at Layla a few times. Finally, he reluctantly let Layla enter and had a bellhop take her bicycle to storage. Layla thanked him and walked into the hotel.

The tea lounge, which included an outdoor patio area, was located on the main lobby's right side. The manager hurried over to greet them, then led them to a table on the patio, facing the river. Layla was the last one seated. Much to her surprise, she was placed directly across from Duke Herhardt.

She was immediately reminded of the way he had stared at her that day at the river, so she quickly lowered her gaze. The thin gold frame of her eyeglasses glittered in the summer sun streaming in obliquely under the awning. The duke was looking at her casually, as if there was no reason for awkwardness between them.

*Why do I feel so embarrassed when he was the one who was seen naked, not me?* Layla wondered. *I suppose it's because nobles see commoners like me as more like furniture or paintings than as real people. No one would feel embarrassed to be naked in front of a piece of furniture, or worry that a painting would be shocked to see them nude.*

As Layla came to this conclusion, the tea table was set. A cup of strong coffee was placed in front of Duke Herhardt, without him having to request it. He lifted the cup with his long, smooth fingers and took a sip.

He and Claudine then began conversing, seemingly having forgotten entirely about Layla. They discussed various topics,

including the art exhibit they had visited earlier that day, news about their relatives, and the party that was planned for the upcoming weekend. Matthias's soft, deep voice gave way to Claudine's clear, high voice at regular intervals.

Layla didn't understand why they had asked her to come along if they weren't interested in talking to her, but she decided not to think about it. Claudine's behavior was beyond her understanding in many ways. This had been true ever since the summer when they had first met, when Layla was twelve.

“So, Layla, how is school? Is it fun?” Claudine asked in an even higher voice as she set her teacup down on its saucer. Even though she was only a year older than Layla, she always talked to her the way an adult would talk to a small child.

“Yes, Miss,” Layla replied. In her mind, she was repeating the phrase *For Uncle Bill* over and over again, as she had grown accustomed to doing to lend herself patience around Claudine.

Claudine nodded contently, then asked a few more questions about school life. Layla responded to each question by smiling politely and saying, “Yes, Miss.” She knew that this was exactly what Claudine expected from her.

“I suppose you'll be graduating next year, then?” Claudine asked, still speaking in a friendly tone despite the look of boredom on her face. “Yes, Miss,” Layla replied, continuing to play the part that had been assigned to her.

“What are you planning to do after graduating?”

“I'm going to get certified as a teacher.”

“A teacher...?” Claudine asked, drawing out the phrase as she lifted her teacup. As she nodded, the ribbon and corsage on her small hat bobbed up and down. “That's excellent, Layla. It's a wonderful goal. I think that will suit you well.” She sounded like she was praising a child. “Don't you think so, Duke Herhardt?”

Without thinking about it, Layla followed Claudine's gaze and turned towards Duke Herhardt. Looking at him with her glasses on, the clear blue of his eyes stood out strikingly, so much so that it

took a moment for it to register with her that those eyes were looking right at her, whereupon she instantly lowered her gaze again.

“I suppose so,” he casually agreed.

After that polite display of interest in Layla, they seemed to forget about her again. This brought her a sense of relief. She hoped that this tedious teatime would be over soon. She was supposed to meet Kyle downtown after his tennis practice. She hoped this wouldn't cause her to be late.

Feeling antsy, she looked up. As she did so, Matthias turned to look at her. Rather than averting her eyes this time, she stared right back at him.

When she was young, his eyes had reminded her of blue marbles, and she had once imagined them knocking against each other and making a crisp clinking noise. As this childish thought flashed back into her mind, she felt even more distant from the duke. It was as if the newfound clarity in her eyesight had increased the clarity of her feelings as well. Her lip started to twitch as her discomfort grew. Soon she found herself saying, “I beg your pardon, Your Grace and Miss Claudine, but do you mind if I excuse myself?” She turned her gaze from Matthias to Claudine, which allowed her to steady her breathing somewhat. “I'm supposed to meet a friend soon,” she added with a tinge of anxiousness in her voice.

Claudine let out a soft chuckle, then granted her permission by nodding. Layla breathed a sigh of relief. She then politely bid farewell and hurried out of the hotel. After the bellhop retrieved her bicycle, she jumped on and set off down the busy city street. Strangely, the farther away she rode from the duke, the clearer his face became in her mind.

*It must be because of the glasses,* she thought as she panted from the exertion. *I saw him more clearly, so I'm remembering him more clearly.* This rationalization made her feel better. *What would have happened if I'd had my glasses on that fateful day at the riverside?*

Just as her thoughts were growing troubled again, she arrived at

the meeting place. Kyle, who had already arrived, waved eagerly at her, smiling brightly. She was back in the comfortable, safe world she was used to.

* * *

“She's grown a lot, hasn't she? She looks like a lady now,” Claudine commented as she watched Layla leave. She sounded like a mother talking about her daughter, even though she was only one year older.

“That's because she is one,” Matthias replied, smiling slightly.

“Yes, I suppose you're right. She is old enough to be called a lady,” Claudine replied before sinking into thought. After a moment, she smiled brightly and deftly changed the subject, saying, “Oh, by the way, did you hear that Riette bought a marvelous new car?”

They continued their aristocratic conversation. It was as if Layla had never even been there. However, she soon showed up once again in an unexpected location.

Matthias was on his way back to Arvis with Claudine after the relaxing teatime. While sitting in stopped traffic, he gazed out the window from his seat in the back of the car, and there was Layla, walking her bicycle as she strolled down the road with a boy. It must have been the friend she was going to meet.

The boy's face looked familiar. After a moment, Matthias realized who he was. It was the family doctor's son. He was fairly sure his name was Kyle Ettman.

Layla shouted something at the boy after he repeatedly tapped her glasses with his finger. This only caused the boy to double down on his mischievousness. Eventually, Layla sighed and started laughing.

The two spent a while laughing and chatting playfully before coming to a stop in front of the front stairs of the library. Layla put down her bicycle's kickstand and sat on the bottom of the steps. Kyle took a paper bag out of the basket he was holding, then sat

down next to her. He reached into the bag and took out two bottles of soda water and a sandwich. The two shared the snack as they sat next to each other. Whenever the boy spoke, Layla would laugh, and whenever she laughed, he would laugh as well.

Meanwhile, the traffic began to move, and Matthias turned to face forward again. Claudine, who had been looking out the window on her side of the car, turned to look at him. They smiled at each other and then resumed their amiable conversation. After a while, Matthias's thoughts drifted from the conversation back to the teatime. It occurred to him that Layla had not touched her teacup once. She had sat with her hands on her lap the entire time before quietly departing.

*She left me to go see that boy.*

Brooding on this thought, he was reminded of the anxious, uncomfortable look on her face when she had been staring at him.

*It must have been because she wanted to go see the boy.*

He then recalled the hurried way she had left the patio, almost as if she were making an escape.

*She was fleeing from me to rush to meet him.*

The car had now made it to Platanus Road, which led to Arvis. As they passed by the spot about halfway down the road where Layla had fallen off her bicycle, Matthias thought to himself, *Layla Llewellyn is nothing to me... So why is she making me feel this way?*

* * *

"Since you got the sandwich, dessert is on me," Layla cheerfully said as she rose from the library steps. She picked up the empty paper bag and bottles and placed them in her bicycle's basket.

"Don't worry about it. I'm not stingy about things like that," Kyle replied with a bashful smile as he hopped onto Layla's bicycle.

Layla sat on the bicycle's back seat. Kyle could feel her body's warmth even in the heat of the midday sun.

His own body temperature started to rise, so he started to turn the pedals, hoping that the breeze would cool him down. She

lightly held onto his shirt with her fingers as they rode. He wished that she would put her arms around his torso, but he didn't dare ask her to. Even so, he couldn't help but smile at the feeling of her closeness to him.

He had intentionally left his own bicycle at home that day, because he had wanted to ride on her bicycle with her. However, he was sure she didn't realize this.

“You know what, Kyle?” she said, her soft voice mixing with the ticking sound of the bicycle's chain.

“What?” Kyle replied. His knuckles were white with anticipation as he gripped the handlebars.

“I'm going to buy you dessert anyway. Ice cream sounds good?”

Kyle chuckled. He had thought she was going to say something serious. “Be honest, you're just offering because you feel like eating ice cream yourself, aren't you?”

“No, that's not it...” she replied unconvincingly.

Kyle steered in the direction of the café that he and Layla often stopped at on the way home from school. As he was putting down the kickstand, she strolled into the café ahead of him. Rather than follow her in, he decided to wait for her outside in the cool shade of the awning. After a short while, she reemerged, holding two vanilla ice cream cones.

They enjoyed their cones as they stood next to one another. It was an everyday activity that they had repeated countless times, and yet it all felt new to Kyle. He could barely take his eyes off of her. *It must be her new glasses,* he thought. Unable to stand it anymore, he whispered, “Layla.”

When she looked at him, he noticed that her cheeks were red. This made his heart skip a beat, even though he was pretty sure it was just from the heat. He gulped nervously, then took a big bite of his half-melted ice cream and said, “This is good. The ice cream, I mean.”

Layla gave a hollow smile and replied, “Isn't it? Vanilla's my favorite.” She then looked up at the clear summer sky.

He gazed at her neck, noticing how long and slender it was, then realized he was staring and looked back at his ice cream. He took another big bite. It was cold and sweet.

# Chapter 9:
## That Lowly, Beautiful Girl

“Is that really her? The orphan that the gardener was taking care of?” Countess Brandt asked, furrowing her brow as she gazed out the window at the garden where a bespectacled young lady was helping the gardener tend the rose bed.

“Yes, Mother. It's Layla, that girl,” Claudine casually replied as she concentrated on her needlework. She was just as skilled at embroidery as ever. While her mother paced around by the window, she patiently made stitch after stitch. As she did so, roses of various colors seemed to bloom from her fingers. “She's a pretty young lady. Don't you think so, Mother? I think she'll only get prettier as she continues to mature.”

“And that doesn't bother you?” Countess Brandt asked.

“I understand your concern, Mother,” Claudine replied as she set down her embroidery frame with a content smile.

Countess Brandt's eyes were wide with worry. She had always had a delicate frame, and had suffered several miscarriages before finally giving birth to a healthy child. That child was the Brandt family's only child, *Claudine*.

Countess Brandt had thus lived in constant fear that her husband would leave her for her failure to provide him with a male heir. Her husband's mistress had also failed to bear him a son, but this provided little consolation to Countess Brandt. She always worried that a pretty young lady would show up one day, bear him a son, and steal away his love.

Claudine understood this about her mother, and while she did feel sorry for her, she was also irritated by her constant fretting. “But I don't like to dwell on things like that, Mother,” she solemnly declared.

The countess sighed in exasperation. “You're still too young to understand men, Claudine. If I were you...”

“You'd get rid of all the pretty ladies in the world so that Duke Herhardt wouldn't be tempted by them, right?” Claudine asked, giggling as she let out an exaggerated sigh. “As you say, I'm still young and don't know much about men yet. But even I know that men who hold a high position in society will typically have a mistress or two.”

“Goodness, Claudine!”

“Naturally, I would prefer if he didn't take a mistress, but if he does, it won't exactly shock me,” Claudine said, shrugging.

Despite her self-possessed exterior, Claudine had been taken aback when she and Matthias had run into Layla. Layla had been a pretty young girl, so it was only natural that she would develop into a pretty young lady. But Claudine had been shocked to see just how beautiful she had become.

She had the distinctive, nymph-like petite frame and dainty features typical of ladies from Lovita. Her mysterious green eyes and flawlessly smooth skin only added to this impression.

Claudine had decided to invite her along to tea for exactly this reason. She was curious how the duke would react to such a lady. And his reaction had been just as she had expected. He had shown a proper balance between interest and indifference, while maintaining perfect dignity and self-control. For Claudine, that had been enough.

“But Claudine, nothing good can come from letting a young lady such as her be around Matthias.” Countess Brandt still looked worried. “Perhaps I'll speak with his mother or his grandmother. What do you think?”

“Mother...” Claudine grumbled. It bothered her the way her mother was always crying over matters of love even though she had every luxury and comfort in the world at her fingertips. She had firmly resolved not to follow in her mother's footsteps in that respect.

That was one of the reasons that she had agreed to get engaged to Matthias. She knew that it was naive to expect a man to only

ever have feelings for a wife that he had obtained through an arranged marriage. Only people who believed in the happy endings of fairytales would be foolish enough to believe such a thing.

For all she knew, Matthias might end up getting swept away by lust for beautiful women, just like her father had. Just like countless men did. As she saw it, there was no real danger in a husband having a mistress, as long as he treated her like a mistress. It was men who treated their mistresses like wives that were problematic. Everything Claudine knew about Matthias suggested that he was in the former category.

*Do I love him?* she asked herself, smiling. *Well, maybe... maybe not. It doesn't really matter either way. And he is well aware of this too.*

What really mattered to her was whether Duke Herhardt would fulfill his role as a husband and father with the same faithfulness and devotion that he showed in fulfilling all his other duties. That was what Claudine wanted. A marriage that would allow her to preserve her dignity.

“Is it such a big deal if Duke Herhardt is interested in that lowly, beautiful girl?” she calmly asked her mother.

Countess Brandt gasped. “My goodness, Claudine! Listen to yourself!”

“At worst, she'll end up as his mistress,” Claudine said, chuckling quietly. “As mistresses go, she wouldn't be that bad. She poses no real threat to me. I have her tamed like a puppy.”

“Oh, Claudine. You really… know nothing about love,” Countess Brandt lamented.

Gazing into her mother's eyes, which were always wet with tears precisely because of love, Claudine smiled faintly, then turned her head towards the window. Outside, she could see Layla, clutching her waist as she laughed about something.

* * *

The cottage was empty when Kyle arrived. Layla and Bill seemed to have gone out to the garden. He considered going there to look

for them, then changed his mind and sat on a chair on the porch.

The image of Layla wearing her new glasses flashed into his mind and brought a wry smile to his face. The future Lady Ettman was pretty even with glasses. It had taken him some time to get used to her new appearance, but now his heart started pounding when he thought of her, just like it had always done in the past.

Realizing that he was starting to blush, he cleared his throat to calm himself down.

Just then, Layla and Bill returned to the cottage.

“What's with the hat?” Kyle asked, furrowing his brow at the sight of the homely, unstylish hat that was blocking Layla's face from his view. “You look like a country bumpkin. Don't tell me you paid money for that thing,” he teased. Layla and Bill both reacted by scowling at Kyle.

“Uncle Bill bought it for me!” Layla shouted, frowning. Bill silently took the shovel out of the wheelbarrow he had just brought back from the garden.

“You know, now that I look at it again, it's pretty. Yep, it's really stylish! Bill has really good taste!” Kyle said, hurrying to amend his previous opinion.

“Don't make fun of it. It's really precious to me,” Layla said, still sulking as she took off the gaudy straw hat, which was covered with ribbons and artificial flowers.

While Bill put away his wheelbarrow, Layla started making lunch. She had neatly placed the hat on one end of the table. Kyle sat down in front of it and glanced at Layla. “Layla, are you mad at me?”

“Yep,” she curtly replied, dropping his plate in front of him.

*Well, at least she's still feeding me,* he thought, feeling somewhat relieved. “I'm sorry. Do you think I would've said that if I'd known your uncle got it for you?”

“I honestly don't know.”

“Why did he buy you a hat all of a sudden, anyway?”

“Because I asked him for one.”

“You did? You know how to ask for stuff?” Kyle asked in amazement. He could hardly remember Layla ever asking for something before.

“He was really upset about my glasses,” Layla said, lowering her voice.

“Ah, he was upset that your eyesight had gotten so bad?”

“No, not that. He was upset that I saved up all that money to buy these expensive glasses without telling him.” Having finished setting the table, she sat down across from Kyle.

The day Layla had returned to the cottage wearing her new glasses, Bill had reacted with shock as if he had been stabbed in the back. After listening to her explain how she had managed to acquire them, he stared at her with a frigid expression. It was the first time she had seen him upset in this way.

*“Layla, do you really trust me that little?”* he had sadly asked, sighing.

This had made Layla feel awful. She tried to reassure him by saying that it wasn't that she didn't trust him, but rather that she had felt ashamed after all he had already done for her, and so had wanted to buy them herself. This only made him grow sadder, however.

After that day, things had felt a bit awkward between them. Bill had sullenly stopped speaking much, while Layla had grown very uneasy, not sure what to say or do.

The solution she finally came up with was the hat. *“Uncle Bill, would you buy me a hat?”* she had suddenly asked a few days earlier at the dinner table. *“I'd love it so much if you'd buy me a pretty hat.”*

Bill had chuckled at her solemn tone. But the following evening, on his way back from buying some pruning shears downtown, he bought her a straw hat covered with flowers and ribbons. Holding it out to her, he had casually said, *“I bought it at Lind's, so if you don't like it, you can go there and exchange it for a different one.”*

*“Did you pick it out yourself?”*

*“Well, sure I did.”*

*“It's very pretty.”* Smiling brightly, she had tried on the hat.

Bill had purchased many items for Layla over the years, but rather than picking them out himself, he had usually either brought Layla to the store with him or asked Chef Mona to take care of it. Thus, Layla keenly felt how big of a gesture it was that he had picked out a woman's hat for her all by himself. It made her feel loved.

Flowers were the prettiest thing in the world to him. Thus a hat covered with flowers had to be the world's prettiest hat. This was the simple logic he had used in selecting the hat for her.

“Hey! You should've told me all that before,” Kyle exclaimed, feeling very ashamed after hearing Layla tell him the story behind the hat. “I feel like trash now after making fun of that gift!”

“When would I have told you? You made fun of it as soon as you saw it.”

“Well sure, but…”

“You insolent loafer!” Bill shouted as he strode through the door. “You're eating all my food again! One of these days I'm going to ask Dr. Ettman to pay me back!”

Kyle was frightened by his threatening tone, but when he looked at his face, he was relieved to see a friendly, playful expression. Noticing the hat sitting on the table, Bill chuckled sheepishly. Seeing Layla smiling sweetly at Bill, Kyle almost felt jealous for a moment.

Any man who loved Layla Llewellyn would have to settle for second place in her heart. First place would always be reserved for Uncle Bill.

Comforting himself with this thought, Kyle picked up his fork and started eating. He was never bothered by Bill's taunts. Layla's cooking was delicious enough that he could easily endure them.

* * *

After lunch, Bill returned to work, leaving Kyle and Layla alone in the cottage. Layla sat on the porch, as usual, reading. Kyle

pretended to read while actually gazing at Layla. Layla's eyes remained glued to the page, besides when she occasionally picked up a biscuit to take a bite.

*I shouldn't have lent her that novel,* Kyle thought, chuckling to himself bitterly. *But my gosh, I bet she has no idea how pretty she looks concentrating on that book, or chewing on that biscuit... Should I tell her how I feel today?*

He set his book on the floor and stared at her with a serious expression. He had planned to wait a bit longer before telling her, but now he was starting to doubt himself.

The lightest brush of her hand against his arm made his heart feel like it was going to explode. His whole body felt hot whenever he was around her. Sometimes he had dreams about her that made him feel guilty.

More than that, he felt a constant sense of dread that someone would appear one day and steal her away from him. That was why he was contemplating throwing caution to the wind and confessing his feelings for her right then.

But just as he was about to do it, they were interrupted by the sound of a horse slowly approaching. He turned his head and saw Duke Herhardt in full riding apparel, sitting on top of a horse. Layla, who had been about to take a bite of her biscuit, looked at him in surprise.

The duke brought his horse to a stop in front of the porch's railing. His gaze briefly paused on Kyle, before moving to rest on Layla's perplexed, blushing face.

# Chapter 10:
## Did You Think It Was A Request?

“Where's Mr. Remmer?” the duke asked Layla, whose head was lowered deferentially. Wiping the crumbs from her lips, she replied, “He's on an errand downtown. Is something the matter?”

Duke Herhardt gave a slight nod, then turned his gaze from Layla back to Kyle, to whom he flashed a courteous smile. Seeing the duke's friendly expression, Kyle felt relieved.

The duke asked Kyle to pass on his thanks to Kyle's father for taking such good care of Dowager Herhardt. He then turned to Layla again. Allowing the smile to fade from his lips, he asked, “Well, Lady Layla, if Mr. Remmer is out, would you be able to harvest some roses for me?”

“Roses? Roses from the garden?”

“Yes, just pick an assortment of them and bring them to my cabin by the river.” With another slight nod, he tugged on his horse's reins and left, not giving Layla any time to respond.

Layla sighed as she looked down at her blouse and skirt, which were covered with biscuit crumbs. She frantically brushed them off, but was unable to brush away the embarrassment she was feeling.

“Uh, Layla, I think you got all the crumbs. You can stop,” Kyle said, snickering.

“Why did he have to appear at a time like this?”

“What's the big deal? Don't you think the duke eats snacks like everybody else?”

“Well sure, but...” Layla muttered, unwittingly rubbing her lips again.

“Why do you care when you're always stuffing your face in front of me?”

“It's different with you. You're my friend.”

“And Duke Herhardt is a stranger. You shouldn't worry more about how you appear in front of a stranger than a friend.”

“Maybe you're right... I don't know, though. I just feel uncomfortable around him,” she said, frowning.

“Why? Did something happen between you two?”

“No, it's not that... He just always makes me feel uncomfortable and tense. I can't explain it. He just does. I don't like it.”

“What about me? You feel comfortable around me, right?” Kyle asked, his voice full of subtle anticipation.

Layla laughed dismissively as she put on her hat. “Of course, Mr. Ettman.”

Kyle's smile widened at this reply. “Good, I thought so. Hey, you want some help picking those roses?”

“No, I can handle it myself. You should head home now.”

“No, I can wait here.”

“Come on, Kyle. If your father finds out you were hanging out here again he'll be furious! He might even get mad at me. Go home and study.”

Kyle frowned. He wanted to argue, but he knew she was right. He took a careful look in the direction the duke had ridden off in. *Why do I feel so anxious? Have I been oversensitive lately?* Not wanting to scare Layla by saying something needless, he kept his mouth shut. *But it's not just any guy, it's Duke Herhardt, the flawless nobleman whose engagement is about to be announced.* Soon, his anxiety got the better of him, and he found himself shouting, “Layla!”

Layla, who was walking towards the rose garden with basket and clippers in hand, turned and smiled, shouting, “See you tomorrow, Kyle!”

*Don't go,* he wanted to say. Swallowing those words, he simply waved. *It's okay. It's Duke Herhardt. Nothing's going to happen.* Repeating this thought to himself over and over, he watched Layla continue to walk away towards the rose garden.

* * *

“Go back.”

Just as Layla was about to leave the cabin, she heard Matthias's

voice. After a few seconds, she realized that his words had been directed at her. Holding her breath, she turned to face him again.

Matthias was sitting across from his butler at a table by the window. He was reviewing documents that were piled on the table, as he had been doing for some time. Without looking up, he said, “The ones you brought are too gaudy. Go get some with more muted colors.” He then looked up at Layla with an extremely gentle smile on his face.

Layla clenched her fists to keep her irritation from boiling over and turning into rage. It seemed that there was a problem with the roses she had selected. The roses of which he had simply asked her to bring “an assortment,” without further specification.

While she stared at the roses she had brought, Matthias turned his attention back to his work. His butler Hessen continued his report, while Matthias listened closely, interjecting with the occasional brief instruction. They were behaving as though their errand girl were no longer there.

Feeling frustrated, she repeated the phrase *for Uncle Bill* in her mind as she quietly left the cabin. *He makes people jump through hoops for him at two in the afternoon in the middle of summer, and people call him a perfect gentleman?* she grumbled as she trudged back to the garden.

For the most part, Layla had little interest in the lives of those who lived in the mansion, but she was aware that the cabin by the river was Duke Herhardt's private getaway spot. He rarely had guests there, and only a limited number of servants would wait on him.

She figured that he had wanted the flowers because of Claudine. Since they would soon be getting engaged, she had thought that perhaps Claudine had started joining him at the cabin occasionally. That was why she had chosen the most colorful roses she could find. She knew that Claudine liked flashy colors. But it had turned out that this was a mistake.

She made it through the woods, and stepped boldly out into the

bright, shadowless garden, where she carefully cut a new selection of roses. To meet the duke's fastidious demand, she chose only soft, muted colors this time. They happened to color she preferred as well, for the most part.

With her basket full of roses in hand, she started walking again in the oppressive heat of the sunny summer afternoon.

*If he was going to be so picky, why didn't he tell me what colors he wanted in the first place?* she thought, venting her anger by kicking stones from the path as she walked. *I hate the duke.* As her irritation continued to build, she started kicking innocent leaves as well.

By the time she arrived back at the cabin, she was starting to feel dizzy from the heat.

The cabin, which had originally been an old boathouse by the dock, had been renovated into a beautiful building that looked like it was half-floating on the river. The first floor housed the boat storage area from the original boathouse, along with a small kitchen where simple refreshments could be prepared. The second floor was the duke's private space and contained a drawing-room, a bedroom, and a dining room.

Holding the basket full of roses, Layla climbed the outdoor staircase up to the second floor. The butler and a maid were just then leaving. She greeted them and then hurried into the drawing-room. Matthias was still in the same spot, sitting with his eyes closed and his head leaning backward.

*Should I wait for him to wake up?* she wondered. Luckily, he soon opened his eyes. His slightly messy hair was covering his forehead.

“I brought the new roses, Your Grace,” she said, holding up the basket. Matthias just stared at her, saying nothing. With his riding jacket removed and the top few buttons of his shirt undone, he looked much more vulnerable and languorous than before.

“Should I... go get different ones again?” she cautiously asked in a quivering voice. *If he makes me go back to the garden for the third time, I'm going to throw the roses at him.*

“If I said yes, would you go?” he asked in a slightly drowsy voice.

“If I made another mistake, then of course I'll have to go. But in that case, please tell me exactly what colors you would like,” she replied. She had intended to respond with a simple *Yes, Your Grace,* but the response that came out of her mouth was much longer. She froze, afraid that her response had been impolite.

Matthias stared at her for a moment, then straightened his posture in his seat and said, “Sit down,” gesturing at the spot across the table from him.

“No, Your Grace. If you are satisfied with these colors, then I should be...”

“Since you brought the flowers, isn't it your duty to put them in a vase, Lady Layla?”

“But Your Grace, I am not skilled in flower arrangement.”

“Do you expect me to do it, then?” he asked, glancing around the room and then back at her. She could easily understand the meaning of that simple gesture, he was indicating that there was no one else in the cabin but them. That is, he was telling her that she needed to put the flowers in a vase, no matter how unskilled she was at flower arrangement.

She cautiously approached him. She didn't have the courage to sit in the seat across from him, so she sat on a chair by the window that faced the river.

Once she had started trimming the roses so that they could be placed in a vase, he turned back to the pile of documents on the table. The silent room was soon filled with the sound of clippers snipping rose stems, and papers being turned and shifted.

As he signed the final document, he suddenly remembered the bird in his bedroom back at the mansion. Despite the bird keeper's warning that canaries were hard to tame, this canary had proved very obedient. It would readily sit on Matthias's finger and sing.

He often found himself staring at the tiny bird, amazed at how beautifully it sang. Sometimes it would flap its wings and fly a short distance, then return to his finger and start singing again, as if it were talking to a friend.

While he sorted the documents, Layla quietly walked to the bathroom to fill a vase with water. She moved smoothly, as if she were weightless.

When she returned, he could tell that she hadn't been lying about her lack of flower arrangement skills. The roses looked like they had been recklessly crammed into the vase.

“Do you like it, Your Grace?” she asked hesitantly.

“It's dreadful,” he replied in a dry tone that didn't sound upset or critical.

She blinked, taken aback, and her cheeks started to redden. “I'm sorry, Your Grace. I will go fetch a maid who is skilled in this sort of thing.”

“Sit.”

“Pardon?”

“Sit down, Layla,” he said with a quieter voice that only heightened the pressure she felt. His finger was pointing directly at the seat across the table from his. She placed the shameful rose vase on a credenza and stiffly sat where he was pointing.

“Eat,” he said, now looking at a tray that was covered by a dome-shaped silver cloche.

She awkwardly lifted the cloche off the tray, and discovered a sandwich and a glass of lemonade.

He quietly watched her as she reacted with puzzlement. Knowing that she liked sandwiches, he had intended the snack as payment for her work. Even though the product of her labors had been awful, the fact remained that she had performed a service for him in the gardener's stead.

“Thank you, Your Grace, but I'm all right,” she said, placing the cloche back on the tray with a trembling hand. Her face, which had been so brightly smiling when she was with the doctor's son, was now full of troubled perplexity. “If there's nothing else you need, I should be on my...”

“Layla.” He was now practically whispering.

She stared at him, blinking slowly.

He took a sip of the whiskey soda in front of him. Beads of condensation from the crystal glass flowed slowly down his fingers. “Did you think it was a request?” His moistened lips made a smile.

# Chapter 11:
## Deep Water

The cabin had large windows on all sides, affording a magnificent view of the river and the forest. Opening these windows provided cross-ventilation that usually kept the interior feeling cool even in the summer.

However, today was an especially hot day. It was not a day when one would expect to feel chills, and yet Layla felt a chill run down her spine, causing her shoulders to shudder. She was determined to eat the food in front of her as fast as possible so she could leave, but so far she had not taken a single bite.

She didn't feel like eating anything. She had already eaten a large lunch and a snack after that. Moreover, laboring in the hot sun had made her lose whatever slight appetite she might have had left. Matthias had already shifted his focus from her back onto his work, but she was still having trouble breathing properly.

*Is he punishing me for doing a poor job at the errand and the flower arrangement?* Layla wondered as she bit off a small piece of the sandwich. *If that was his goal, he has succeeded. I certainly feel like I'm being punished.*

As she slowly chewed the piece of sandwich, she felt like spitting it out. To combat this urge, she took a sip of lemonade. She then wiped the moisture from her hands onto her apron and picked up the sandwich again. She lowered the brim of her hat to hide what she was sure was an agonized look on her face.

Just then, a long finger touched her chin. “Layla, if you're a lady,” Matthias said, untying the ribbon under her chin as he spoke, “then you should remove your hat when you're indoors.” Before she could respond, he took her straw hat off her head.

Layla reflexively bolted out of her seat, knocking a piece of the sandwich to the floor. Matthias narrowed his eyes, but Layla didn't notice. Her attention was fixed solely on her hat. “P-please give it

back.” Her voice was trembling, not with fear but with anger. “Will you please give it back to me, Your Grace? I'm going to leave now. I want to go home. Give me back my hat, please.”

Matthias gripped the hat more tightly to indicate that he had no intention of returning it to her. *All I did was take her hat,* he thought. *Why is she reacting like she's been stripped naked?* He noticed with amusement that she was blushing. It seemed that her skin was quick to react to minor things. “Eat,” he said, pointing to the two remaining pieces of sandwich on her plate. “Eat, and you'll get your hat back and you can go home. It's simple.”

“No, I don't want to,” she said, shaking her head as she approached him. “I don't feel like eating. I can't stomach anything right now. I hate it.” Her frightened eyes were quivering. She was amazed to hear the bold words coming out of her mouth.

Matthias tightened his grip on the hat and stood up from his seat. Looming over her ominously, he asked, “You hate it?”

“I'm sorry for everything. Please give me back my hat. Okay?” Standing on her tiptoes, she reached for the hat. She was on the verge of tears.

Keeping his eyes fixed on her face, Matthias slowly extended his arms and held the hat tantalizingly above her head. Layla watched closely as he did so, then shifted her gaze to look him in the eye.

After a brief, tense moment, Matthias proceeded to toss the hat out the window. The hat was swept up by the breeze and flew onto the surface of the river. Layla gave him an icy-cold scowl, then frantically ran out of the room.

Matthias walked to the window looking out onto the dock and river. Layla soon appeared on the dock. At first trying to reach the floating hat with her foot, she soon removed her apron and glasses and set them down on the dock.

*Is she really going to jump into the river just to get that stupid hat?* Matthias wondered, looking down at her with delight.

Despite her bold actions, Layla was visibly shaking, as if she were afraid of the water.

*She wouldn't dare...* Matthias scoffed.

Just then, Layla jumped into the river. After a moment of hesitation, she started wading towards the spot where the hat was floating. As she got closer, the water came up to her knees, then her waist, then to her chest, but she didn't stop. Matthias kept watching the ridiculous sight with his arms loosely folded.

As Layla reached for the hat, it floated out of her reach again. Rather than give up, she confidently took another step towards the hat, then another.

*The water's going to be above your head soon,* Matthias thought.

With her arm fully extended, Layla continued to reach in vain for the hat, until finally she caught the tip of its ribbon. At the same instant, she disappeared under the surface of the water.

“Sure enough,” Matthias muttered, frowning.

Layla had become submerged at the precise spot he had predicted. Shocked by the sudden increase in depth of the water, she flailed about desperately, but this only caused her to drift into even deeper water. All the while, she kept holding onto the hat's ribbon, as if it were her lifeline.

Matthias headed down to the dock with large strides. Another prediction of his had turned out to be true, Layla had unflinchingly jumped into the river without knowing how to swim. He stopped at the end of the dock and looked down at the floundering Layla. Her screams grew fainter as her head bobbed above and below the water's surface.

*All she needed to do was eat, get her hat back, and go home. Rather than doing such a simple task, she chose to raise this commotion.* Matthias let out a sigh, then dived into the river.

* * *

The sun-warmed wooden slats of the dock felt hot against Layla's cheek. This sensation was the first thing she noticed before realizing that she had made it safely out of the water. The relief she felt was soon followed by a rush of pain and fear.

Her body convulsed as she started coughing uncontrollably. Even so, she maintained her grip on the hat she had retrieved from the river. Matthias chuckled at the sight, still catching his breath.

Layla's soaked body had left a dark impression on the dock. “What the... What happened...?” she stammered, panting for air. She was looking at him with a piercing glare that was made more striking by the tears in her eyes.

Brushing the wet hair from his forehead, Matthias looked down at her with amusement. Now that he had caught his breath, his laughter grew louder.

Layla used her quivering hands to push her torso up off the hot surface of the dock. Water dripped from her long, wet hair like rain. Her eyes were red, but she didn't cry. Instead, she just looked angrily at Matthias, that wicked man who was now laughing cheerfully. She thought about saying something, then changed her mind and clumsily stood up.

Matthias lazily sat down on the wooden dock, as if he were sunbathing. His thin, wet clothes clung to him, revealing the shape of his body underneath.

When his gaze moved to her trembling shoulders, she suddenly started vigorously shaking the hat to dry it.

Without flinching, Matthias allowed the cool water from the hat to splash against his face. Layla saw this as her revenge, even though he didn't particularly seem to mind. Placing the still-dripping hat on her head, she started to wring out her skirt. Her eyes were fixed defiantly on him.

“Are you having fun?” Matthias asked, wiping his face as though he were washing it. “Personally, I'm getting tired of this.” In an instant, the smile left his face and was replaced with a look as cold as the water of the river.

Layla flinched, but didn't avert her eyes. “How... what… why are you doing this?”

“Layla, shouldn't you say *'thank you'* first?” He slowly rolled up the sleeves of his wet shirt. “You should thank the person who just

saved you from drowning." He was speaking in a mockingly relaxed tone.

"If you hadn't thrown my hat into the river in the first place, none of this would have happened."

"No," he said, slowly furrowing his brow, "none of this would have happened if you had simply eaten your sandwich and left like you were supposed to."

Layla just blinked, too upset to speak. The duke was speaking too calmly to be joking.

"Or if you hadn't made the foolish decision to jump into the water even though you don't know how to swim," he added, shaking the water from his fingers.

Eventually, Layla suppressed her anger and reluctantly said, "Thank you for saving me, Your Grace." Meanwhile, she was internally repeating her mantra, *For Uncle Bill... For Uncle Bill... For Uncle Bill...*

"Again," he quietly said, still not smiling, "Say it like a lady."

This time, not even her utmost love for Bill could stop her anger from coloring her response. "I'm sorry, Your Grace, but I'm not a lady like the noblewomen you are used to spending time around."

Matthias didn't flinch. "That doesn't matter, Layla. You must behave like a lady in front of me." Some water dripped from his fingers and landed on her foot. "That's because no matter what you might be, I'm a gentleman." His mouth formed a slight grin, but his eyes remained serious.

Layla gripped her wet skirt so tightly that her knuckles went white. Then she curtsied gracefully to him, just like he wanted. Water dripped off the brim of her hat and sprinkled onto the dock. "I offer you my sincere gratitude for saving my dear life, Your Grace," she said, enunciating each syllable perfectly despite the fact that her whole body was shaking.

Matthias bobbed his chin to indicate that her gesture had been sufficiently ladylike.

Clenching her fists, she thought to herself, *Don't cry, Layla*

*Llewellyn. Please don't cry because of a guy like him.* Once she had regained some of her composure, she straightened her posture again. “I will be going, then. Goodbye, Your Grace.” Without waiting for a response, she confidently turned and left Matthias on the dock. As she walked away, the water dripping from her skirt left a trail on the ground. Her legs felt wobbly, and she almost fell a few times, but managed through sheer effort to maintain her balance.

Gritting her teeth, she made a resolution. *I won't fall over today. And I won't let that man treat me like his plaything anymore. No matter what.*

Once she was out of his sight, she started running. Her eyes were now so teary that even the shade of the hat wouldn't obscure their redness. This bothered her, so she started to increase her speed.

Once, she had chanced to see him on a walk with Claudine through the forest. The sight of that elegant gentleman escorting that beautiful lady had looked like something out of a fairytale or a courtly romance.

When they had reached the edge of the woods, a sudden gust of wind had blown Claudine's hat off her head. Matthias had slowly walked over to the hat, picked it up, and returned it to Claudine. His unhurried movements had been incredibly grateful. By the time Layla had noticed that he always moved like that, they had been out of her sight.

Even when scolding and shaming her today, he had done so with equally graceful movements. As she thought about this, she suddenly felt queasy. She stopped running, then staggered over to a thicket where she threw up the food she had been forced to eat. Her eyes were blurry with tears, but she didn't let herself cry.

Once her nausea had passed, she went to a shallow brook that flowed through the forest and rinsed off her mouth. She sat down to rest under the shade of a tree, and soon felt much better.

Rubbing her lips with the back of her hand, she headed back to the path leading to the cottage. She had no more energy to run, so she walked, dragging her feet as she went and causing a cloud of

dust to rise from the ground. Soon her wet stockings and skirt were coated with dust, but she didn't care, since she was already a mess.

Once the cottage was in sight, she gathered her last ounce of strength and kicked a hazelnut that had fallen on the path. As she squinted to see the innocent nut rolling along the path, she suddenly realized the fatal mistake she had made.

“My glasses...”

Frantically feeling at her face, she started sobbing. Looking back, the path she had just traveled seemed long, dark, and ominous.

# Chapter 12:
## The Raven Gentleman

He turned the dial, and music began to flow out of the speakers. The stereo, which sat on a mahogany cabinet, played an opera aria, filling the cabin's silent drawing room in an instant.

Matthias changed the frequency a few times, settling down on the sofa once a waltz started playing. The melody was lilting and beautiful. His long fingers slowly tapped the armrest along with the beat. The clock on the credenza showed that it was five o'clock.

He briefly looked at the poorly-arranged vase of roses next to the clock, then shifted his gaze to the view out the open window. As evening approached, the air grew much cooler. The breeze blowing in from the river swayed his robe before shifting in the direction of the forest.

He reached and opened the small silver box on the table by the sofa. As he took a cigarette from the nearly-full box and lit it, the waltz came to a close. Listening to the lively string piece that followed, he took a slow drag of the cigarette. It was a quiet, tedious summer evening.

As the string piece came to a close, he picked up the pair of eyeglasses from the tray on which he had earlier them set down. He looked through the lenses and instantly felt dizzy.

*Is that why she was always squinting?* he wondered, recalling the scrunched-up face of Layla as a young girl. Despite her shabby appearance, her eyes had always shone quite brightly.

This young girl, whose stay at Arvis was supposed to be temporary, was still in Matthias's world and had now grown into a woman.

In his mind, he superimposed the image of her as an unsightly young girl with that of her as a slender-faced young woman wearing these glasses with their thin, gold frames. That woman, whose eyes still shone brightly just as they had done when she was

a girl, always gave off a fresh, sweet fragrance. It was the fragrance of the flower that filled Arvis's garden every summer, the rose.

Taking a long drag of his cigarette and slowly exhaling it, Matthias walked out to the balcony overlooking the river, holding the glasses loosely in his hand. As he playfully tossed the glasses into the air and caught them again, his shadow grew longer.

“Layla...” he whispered. In his mind, the name was closely associated with the sweltering heat of the summer. “Layla Llewellyn.” It tickled his tongue as he said it, which irritated him slightly.

He went back inside and placed the glasses in the drawer of the credenza. As he closed the drawer, the image of the green eyes he had seen through those glasses faded from his mind as well.

He walked to the bathroom and took a long shower, then got dressed and combed his hair. By the time he left the cabin to attend dinner, he was back to being the perfect gentleman, Duke Herhardt.

It was an uneventful summer evening.

* * *

“Are you sure a raven didn't steal it?” Bill asked half-jokingly.

The dour-faced Layla shrugged as she sat at the table. “Ugh... I sure hope not.”

“It's possible. They go crazy for shiny things. Remember when that raven stole your hairpin?” he said, laughing heartily. Once Layla was reminded of this memory, her morose face gave way to a smile.

For her thirteenth birthday, Bill had bought her a bright, shiny hairpin. Of course, he hadn't picked it out himself; he had asked Chef Mona, who had chosen it after carefully observing other girls Layla's age and seeing what kind of hair accessories were popular with them.

Layla had treasured the pin so much, that she had been afraid to wear it, lest something happen to it. Eventually, Bill had told her that if she didn't start wearing it right away, he was going to throw

it out. If he hadn't said this, it might have remained in a drawer in her room forever.

However, the pin met its cruel fate the very first day she wore it. She had set it down on a fence while working in the vegetable garden. Suddenly a raven had grabbed it in its beak and flown away. While previously Layla had loved all birds, this incident had soured her feelings towards ravens.

“Let me know if you can't find it, Layla,” Bill said in a strained voice as if he were begging her. “Don't make that face. I can buy you a new pair, no problem. Got it?”

Layla nodded readily. “Yes, Uncle, I will.”

Even though she didn't want him to buy her new glasses, she was humoring him because she was confident that her old pair was still sitting right on the dock where she had left it.

* * *

However, when she went to the river the next morning at the crack of dawn, all that she found was a disappointment. When she couldn't find the glasses anywhere on the dock, she checked the area surrounding the cabin, and even the riverside, but they were nowhere to be found.

Her apron was in the exact spot she had left it; only her glasses had disappeared. She wondered for a moment whether the wind had blown the glasses away, but if this had been the case then the apron wouldn't have still been in place. She was certain that she had removed her glasses first, and then placed the apron on top of them. It didn't make sense that the glasses would have disappeared on their own.

*Unless...*

A possibility occurred to her as she snooped around in front of the cabin. Soon, however, she shook her head and dismissed it as absurd. *The duke would have no reason to take them, right?*

With slumped shoulders, she turned back. *I should've come looking for them sooner,* she thought. She had put off returning to the dock

for fear that she would run into the duke.

“Was it really you?” she muttered, glaring at a raven perched on a tree branch.

The bird cocked its head a few times, as if feigning innocence, then flew away deep into the forest.

Layla clenched her fists to strengthen her resolve and started walking with longer strides than before. She was going to return to the cottage and eat breakfast so that she could think about what to do next with a fresh mind.

The culprit who stole her glasses had to be one of two suspects: either a raven or the duke.

* * *

A snow-white pigeon was sitting outside the window. When Kyle happened to notice it, he smiled and opened the window.

“Hi, Phoebe.”

It didn't fly away even when Kyle reached towards it and casually removed the tiny note tied to its leg.

Phoebe was Layla's messenger pigeon. Having been fascinated by birds since childhood, Layla had once read a book about pigeons that could deliver letters, which had kindled an ambition in her to own one of her own.

*“Yeah, sure, go ahead,”* Kyle had said sarcastically, snickering. To him, the idea of such a bird showing up at his window sounded fantastical, like something out of an ancient legend.

And yet, the tenacious Layla Llewellyn had succeeded. Persisting in the face of several failed attempts, she had eventually managed to train the pigeon.

It had now been two years since the late-spring day when Phoebe had first shown up at Kyle's window. Hardly believing his eyes, he opened the window and found a pigeon with a note tied to its legs staring at him. It was a beautiful bird with shiny white feathers and ink-black eyes.

The note Layla had sent along with Phoebe that day was only one

sentence long: *Hello, Mr. Ettman.*

However, Kyle had been able to read many more things into that one short sentence: He could see Layla jumping for joy after accomplishing her goal. He could see Layla laughing excitedly with sparkling eyes. He could see his dear friend Layla happy.

*To think, a messenger pigeon in this modern-day world,* Kyle had thought, chuckling at the absurdity of the idea. And yet, he could understand the appeal. To Layla, Phoebe functioned like a telephone. Since there was no actual telephone in the cottage, Phoebe was extremely useful.

However, the note brought by Layla's messenger today carried tragic news: *Kyle, I've lost my eyeglasses. I have to look for them, so I won't be able to go to the library with you. I'm really sorry.*

While Kyle solemnly read the note, Phoebe flew off, having fulfilled her duty. Kyle carefully folded the note, put it between the pages of a thick book on his desk, and hurried out of his room.

“Kyle! Are you going to see Layla again?” Mrs. Ettman asked with a frown as she saw Kyle rushing down the stairs.

Kyle simply smiled at her, without slowing down.

“You need to study, Kyle!”

“I'll study at Layla's, Mom!” he energetically replied before dashing out the front door.

The sleek chrome bicycle smoothly departed from the Ettman estate. Once he entered Arvis, Kyle felt more urgency and started pedaling faster. He had no interest in going to the library. He had only planned to go there so that he could be with Layla. He was very concerned about her now.

She had worked so hard to buy those glasses. His heart ached as he thought of that silly girl making and selling all that jam by herself just to avoid being a burden to Bill.

“Huh, Kyle?” Layla said with a start. She had been hanging laundry on a clothesline when his bicycle had screeched to a stop right in front of her.

“Did you find your glasses?” he asked.

Her face turned sullen. “No. Not yet.”

Unable to bear seeing her sad, he blurted, “I'll buy you a new pair!”

She stared at him for a moment then quietly asked, “You, Kyle? Why?”

Only then did Kyle realize what he had said. His emotions had gotten the better of him, and he had briefly forgotten what kind of person she was.

“Thanks, Kyle, but I could never let you do that,” she said, smiling sweetly to avoid embarrassing him. “And anyway, I really want to find them.” Her mouth was smiling but her eyes were serious with determination. Kyle knew those eyes well. They were the eyes of someone who would never back down, no matter what.

“I'm going to find them.”

* * *

Layla spent days searching the forest. The doctor's son helped her. Finding their vain efforts admirable, Matthias feigned ignorance. He was also quite amused by the sight of them checking innocent bird nests.

*Has she really not figured it out? Or does she not want to believe it?*

Matthias had stopped partway up the cabin's external staircase and was gazing at the vast forest adjacent to the river. He was starting to grow tired of watching Layla and that boy's folly. It no longer felt as worthwhile to take time out of his busy schedule to come here for this purpose, as he had done for the past several days in a row.

He continued up the staircase, sweeping back his hair, which had been ruffled by the wind from the river. Following behind him, Hessen quietly opened the door and took a step back.

Matthias headed straight for the drawing room. Rather than sit on the sofa like usual, he leaned against the wall and looked out the window overlooking the forest.

“Marquess Lindman will be arriving today around noon,” Hessen

said.

“Riette? That's earlier than scheduled.”

“Lady Elise has instructed me to pay special attention to the luncheon. She requested that Your Grace attend as well, if you have no prior engagements.”

“Yes, I'll be there.”

A gust of wind caused the chiffon curtains half-covering the window to slowly balloon out into the room. When they flattened again, Matthias narrowed his eyes, which were directed at the empty, sunny path down below. Layla was under a tree at the end of that path, slowly circling it with her hands clasped together.

*Maybe she's not so foolish after all.*

Snickering quietly, Matthias turned his attention back to the report Hessen was delivering to him. Meanwhile, the middle-aged maid poured Matthias a cold glass of lemon water. The ice in the glass clinked pleasingly.

The butler and maid left after completing their tasks. With the long-necked glass in his hand, Matthias gazed at the scenery out the window. Once the butler and maid were fully out of sight, Layla began to approach the river.

Soon after, the cabin's silence was broken by the sound of the doorbell. Matthias slowly rose from his seat.

# Chapter 13:
## Moonlit Night

Unlike the day when she had left the cabin in a huff, Layla showed up today looking like a gentle, elegant lady. Reclining on the sofa, Matthias gazed at her.

“My sincere apologies for bursting in on you like this, Your Grace,” she hesitantly said with her head lowered to avoid his gaze. Her long, full eyelashes made the appearance of her lowered eyes particularly striking. After nervously licking her lips for a moment, she continued. “I'm sorry, but I'd like to ask you something.”

Just then, the phone started ringing.

Matthias slowly rose from his seat, then passed by the startled Layla to pick up the phone. It seemed to be a business call about some complicated contract issue.

Still looking startled, Layla watched Matthias as he skillfully directed the conversation with the person on the other end of the line. From his quiet yet commanding tone of voice and the brief, polite interjections he periodically made, it was clear that his power and dignity were allowing him to effortlessly dominate the other person. Layla felt like she was perceiving the perfect Duke Herhardt whom the residents of Karlsbar were always praising. This made her suspicion that he was the one who had stolen her glasses sound ridiculous.

*I don't know why I even came here. It can't be him... Then was it a raven after all?* While mentally counting how many raven's nests there were in the forest, she silently excused herself from the duke, who was still on the phone.

Unexpectedly, he turned towards her and, putting his hand over the receiver, said, “Wait.” That short command sounded like it had come from someone else wholly different from the perfect Duke Herhardt of a moment earlier.

Layla froze awkwardly. Matthias then resumed his phone

conversation as if nothing had happened. Watching him, Layla had another realization. She realized that even when he was engaged in the most sociable of conversation, his eyes remained calm. They remained largely the same even when he smiled. His posture, however, was always graceful and upright. Even though the person on the other end of the phone couldn't see him, he never slouched. It seemed that this was a deeply-ingrained habit for him.

The phone call went on for several more minutes. Once it was over, he walked over to the table and jotted something down. Layla put her nervously wriggling hands behind her back. Just as she was starting to wonder if he had forgotten that she was there, Matthias finally looked over at her, and said, “Go ahead.”

“Pardon?”

“Ask me what you came here to ask.”

The feeling of his gaze on her was overwhelming, so she lowered her eyes slightly. “Oh... well, it's about my eyeglasses. I was just wondering if you saw them at the dock… on the day I jumped into the river.”

“Hmm... I don't think I've seen them...” He slowly rose from his seat and walked towards her. “But I do think I hid them.”

“I... huh? Pardon?” She looked up at him in shock. “Did you really hide my glasses, Your Grace?”

“What do you think?”

“I don't think you would do such a thing,” she replied, frowning slightly.

“Why not?” he asked. He cocked his head with amusement, gently swaying his bangs, which were as black as a raven's feathers.

“Because... that would be a very mean thing to do, Your Grace,” she replied, digging her feet into the ground rather than stepping back. She had searched through countless raven's nests with Kyle before finally building up the courage to come here today.

Even though she disliked the duke, she could at least communicate with him, unlike with ravens. She had felt like it would be worth speaking with him so that she could rule out one of

the two suspects, between the duke and the ravens. But now she wasn't so sure. If Duke Herhardt was going to make enigmatic statements that only added to her confusion, perhaps it was no more possible to communicate with him than with a raven.

They stared into each other's eyes for an extended moment. If the butler hadn't returned with an urgent telegram and piece of mail, the moment might have lasted quite a bit longer.

Blushing slightly, Layla stepped out of the way and walked towards the window.

After a lengthy, quiet exchange with the butler, Matthias cast a sidelong glance in Layla's direction. She couldn't be sure because she wasn't wearing her glasses, but it seemed like his red lips were smiling. Gathering all her courage, she started to speak. “I...”

However, Matthias instantly cut her off by pointing towards the door with his chin. It was a simple yet cold way of letting her know that her time in the cabin had come to an end.

* * *

“A bird? Why have you suddenly picked up such a random hobby?” Riette asked, looking at the birdcage with a bemused expression.

Inside the beautiful gold cage was sitting an equally beautiful golden-yellow bird.

“Are you raising it so that you can shoot it?”

Everyone gathered in the master suite's drawing room laughed at Riette's joke. Matthias chuckled quietly as well. As usual, he made no response. As Riette made a few more witty remarks, some maids came in with champagne.

A banquet had been served to commemorate the reunion of all the relatives who were spending the summer together. After the meal concluded, the attendees had naturally split up into groups by age to mingle. The group that included Matthias, Riette, and Claudine was using the master suite's drawing room. Claudine had specially requested this from Matthias, even resorting to baby talk

to persuade him. The fact that he had granted permission for them to use a space that he normally kept strictly to himself showed just how generous he was to his fiancée.

Among close friends and family, Matthias and Claudine's engagement had already been as good as confirmed for a long time. They were all aware that Countess Brandt came with her only daughter to Arvis every year, and that the Herhardt family always gave them a warm reception.

Everyone had already put the pieces together, so the engagement announcement came as a shock to no one. It would have come as a shock if Matthias had chosen someone else as his future duchess.

When the bird flew out of the open door of its cage and landed on Matthias's shoulder, Riette burst into laughter. “I don't think that bird knows what sort of person Duke Herhardt is,” he remarked. “A bird in love with an expert bird hunter? I don't know whether to call it stupid or pitiful.”

Matthias extended his hand, and the bird immediately hopped to perch on his finger.

“Claudine, what do you think?” asked Riette. Everyone's eyes turned to Claudine.

“Well, I don't know,” she replied, looking at the bird singing on Matthias's finger. “Why not call it a stupid *and* pitiful bird?”

The group burst into another round of laughter at the compromise Claudine had suggested.

The mood in the room was warm and intimate, since it had been such a long time since they had all been together like this. The names they all knew, the world they all inhabited, and the interests they all shared were all factors that led them to laugh together.

Gazing at Matthias's face as he looked at the bird, Claudine warmly asked, “That bird, what's its name? If it doesn't have one yet, may I name it?”

“It wouldn't be worth your effort, My Lady,” Matthias replied, turning his head towards Claudine. The expression on his face was almost the same as before, but a faint smile was detectable and

gave off a feeling of warmth. “A bird is just a bird.” His cold words stood in stark contrast to the bird's cheerful song, and to the warmth in his smile.

“Yep, it's a stupid and pitiful bird, all right,” said Riette, clicking his tongue as he looked at the bird with pity. “It loves a hunter who won't even allow it to be named!”

* * *

The group continued sipping champagne and laughing merrily until late at night, when they finally left.

Brushing past the maids who were tidying up the drawing room, Matthias walked outside to go on a night stroll by himself. His no longer smiling face was as still as the night. It was time for him to check the trap he had laid. He knew she wasn't a fool and must have noticed, but probably hadn't given up. Thus she had probably been caught.

As he thought through this logic, he walked through the rose garden and into the forest. The wind grew cooler as he approached the river. He came out of the forest and stopped in front of the riverside cabin. The moon was shining with a clear, white light.

He entered the cabin's drawing room and opened the drawer of the credenza. The eyeglasses lying there shimmered in the moonlight. He lifted the glasses and, holding them as gently as he held his canary, laid his listless body on the sofa.

*What am I trying to catch with this bait?* he wondered, gazing at the shining glasses. No answer was coming to him, but he didn't mind. *I'll know the answer once she is trapped.*

As he repeatedly tossed the glasses up in the air and caught them, the moonlit night deepened.

* * *

It was a crazy thing to do. Layla fully realized this. No one in their right mind would dare sneak into the duke's cabin.

“Yeah, I should just sleep.”

She stopped pacing around her room and flopped onto her bed. She pulled up her thin blanket and shut her eyes tight.

“But my glasses...”

No matter how many times she tried this, she couldn't fall asleep. The duke had hidden her glasses. She was now sure of it. She had no idea why he had done so, but he definitely had. Thus she had to find them.

With renewed determination, she sprung out of bed again. She highly doubted that he would have brought the glasses all the way back to the mansion, so they had to be somewhere in the cabin.

That was a remote spot, and it was almost midnight. Thus, it seemed like it would be all right as long as she went there quickly and left no trace. The moon was shining brightly, so it wouldn't be so scary outside in the dark.

“Yes, it'll be all right,” she muttered to herself to strengthen her courage as she opened the door of her room.

The quiet cottage was completely dark. The only sound that could be heard was Bill snoring in his room. She grabbed a lace shawl that was hanging next to the door and hurried out of the cottage. Whenever she got the urge to turn back, she thought about the countless hours she had spent picking raspberries and stirring jam to raise the money for the glasses.

“They're my glasses, after all,” she muttered to herself to lessen the anxiety that she started to feel when the Schulter River appeared in the distance, glimmering in the moonlight.

As she picked up her pace, her soft, blonde hair, which hung down below her waist, shook with each step. The more she thought about the duke, the stranger he seemed to her. As she walked the dock next to the cabin, a sudden thought occurred to her. *Could it be that he is attracted to shiny objects, like ravens are?*

As such suspicions and worries continued to occupy her thoughts, she reached the cabin where her glasses were hidden. Only then did it occur to her that she had come all this way in her nightgown. She wasn't too worried about this, however, since it was the middle of

the night and no one would be around to see her.

After a final moment of hesitation, she took a deep breath and stepped boldly forward.

* * *

*Sure enough.*

Once again, Layla Llewellyn's behavior had not strayed from Matthias's expectations.

As he heard her footsteps ascending the staircase outside, he slowed his breathing. There was a long pause as she hesitated outside the door. Even though he had left the door unlocked for easy entry, she ultimately opened the hallway window. She never fully strayed from his expectations, but she was always surprising him in small ways like this.

She climbed in through the window. He remained lying on the sofa, keeping his ears pricked to track where she was walking. He heard the hallway's floor creak quietly, then he heard Layla sigh in relief.

Grinning, he lowered his gaze from the ceiling. Not long after that, Layla entered the drawing room. Standing absolutely still, she eyed the surroundings for a moment, then took a few cautious steps forward. She first began to inspect the area around one of the windows.

Since Matthias's eyes were already adjusted to the dark, he had no trouble recognizing her figure. The moonlight flowing in through the window faintly illuminated her where she stood in front of the table.

As he squinted to get a better look at her, she moved on to her next location, the cabinet. With each careful step she took on her tiptoes, the skirt of her nightgown swayed around her slender calves. The moonlight shone through the flimsy white garment she had on, which seemed to be a nightgown.

*What am I trying to catch with this bait?*

Matthias caressed the frames of the glasses he was holding. The

cool, smooth feeling gave him a feeling of mental clarity. Meanwhile, Layla had moved in front of the credenza that sat across from the sofa where he was lying. He turned his gaze again and saw her back illuminated by the moon.

*That woman.*

He finally understood the reason he had laid this trap. It was so that he could have Layla, that woman who was no longer a girl.

“Are you looking for these?” he asked, gently shaking the glasses in his hand.

Layla, who had been in the middle of reaching into the credenza's drawer, turned quickly around in surprise, then stumbled backward with her trembling hand over her mouth. *She's going to bump into the wall,* Matthias thought. He then slowly rose to a sitting position on the sofa, and the moonlight shone on his face.

They locked eyes in the bright light of the moon.

# Chapter 14:
## I Desire Her

Layla feebly trembled as Matthias looked at her.

*She acts tough, but deep down she's a coward,* he thought, reflecting on his memories of her going back to when she was young. He stood up and walked towards her, stopping when he was about one step away from her.

She looked at his hand and saw that he was holding what were unmistakably her glasses. Barely able to make a sound, she faintly said, “I'm... sorry,” delivering a polite apology despite the anger burning in her eyes. “I didn't think that you would be here, Your Grace. I'm truly sorr-”

“Do you think it would've been all right to break in here if I hadn't been here?” he asked, tilting his head at her.

Layla's large, bloodshot eyes grew moister each time she blinked. She was on the brink of tears, but she maintained a confident posture.

“Like... a burglar?” he asked in a quietly mocking tone.

Her bright-red cheeks were noticeable even in the darkness. “I just wanted to take back what's mine,” she said.

“Ah, you mean these?” he asked, holding up the glasses.

The blush in her cheeks took over her whole face, extending even to her ears. “Yes,” she boldly replied. “My glasses, which you hid.”

*Look at how much she's trembling.* Still clutching the glasses, he walked over to the window. It was the window through which he had thrown her hat into the river.

“D-don't!” she shouted, chasing after him. “Give them back! Please!” The shawl slid off her shoulders and fell to the floor. She frantically put her arms over her chest to cover the cleavage revealed by the deep neckline of her nightgown.

“Isn't it a bit silly that you're making such a fuss over me seeing you in that nightgown, when you've seen every inch of my body?”

he asked, snickering.

Now even her neck was bright red. “Th-that wasn't my fault!” she insisted, shaking her head fearfully. “I didn't want to see you like that, and there was nothing I could do about-”

“Do you think I wanted to see you like this?”

“What? Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that.” She hurriedly picked up the shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders and chest.

He chuckled softly at her half-crazed expression. “Why are you suddenly acting like a lady? I thought you said you weren't a lady.”

“Whatever I am, you're a gentleman, Your Grace,” she snapped back, maintaining politeness while not backing down.

He chuckled again. “Well...” He stopped laughing and spoke more quietly. “Who knows—maybe I'm not a gentleman after all.”

“N-no!” she urgently shouted as she tied the ends of the shawl into a tight knot in front of her chest. “You *are* a gentleman!”

“Really?”

“Yes! The greatest gentleman in all of Karlsbar!”

“That's quite a generous appraisal.”

“Everyone who knows you thinks so, Your Grace.”

“Including you?”

Suppressing the urge to shout *“No!”* she shook her head and answered, “Yes. Of course I do.” *Layla Llewellyn,* she thought, *you have sold your soul for eyeglasses.* “So please, Your Grace, please give them back.” Fighting back her tears, she added, “They're really special and important to me.” She bowed her head in submission, despite the indignity of the gesture. She was feeling so much pent-up rage that she could have kicked every stone in the forest and still had more rage left over to vent. But she was aware that she was at an extreme disadvantage in this situation.

If he felt like it, Duke Herhardt could brand her a thief and have her banished from the estate. He could also simply toss her glasses out the window into the river. Either of these simple acts would be fatal for her.

Thus she had to put up with him, no matter what he did.

Matthias tossed the glasses into the air and caught them, then started walking towards her. Soon he was close enough to her that they could feel each other's body heat.

Layla looked up at him in shock. As he gazed down at her, his eyes were as deep and calm as a deep river on a windless day. Just like the cold river that tried to swallow her up on that hot afternoon when this misfortune began.

As she pondered over these thoughts, her blurry vision suddenly became clear. She then realized that Matthias had placed her glasses on her face. His palms felt warm and soft against her cheeks, like sand on a sunny day.

She saw him clearly, while everything else grew indistinct. Feeling flustered, she tried to turn away, but his hands held her face firmly in place. She wanted to ask him why he was doing this, but then she felt a strange, frightening sensation. His hands were touching her mouth.

His fingers moved slowly, coming to a rest in between her slightly-opened lips. He let out a sigh that tickled her forehead. His breath was warm and soft, just like his hands.

With his eyes still locked on hers, he started to run his finger over the moist inner surface of her lower lip. As his finger went in and out of her mouth, his fingernail tapped against her teeth. Forgetting even her urge to escape, Layla remained frozen stiff, enduring his gaze and his touch.

When she was about to cry over his strange, incomprehensible behavior, he slowly closed his eyes. His grip on her face tightened slightly, then loosened.

When he finally let go, she stumbled backward a few steps. She was suddenly flooded with discomfort from having been unable to breathe properly while he was holding her face. Her body quivered as she struggled to catch her breath.

Meanwhile, Matthias opened his eyes again. The aloof look in his deep-blue eyes made her feel dirty and ashamed. After gazing at her

for a long while, he softly said, “Go.”

Layla had no recollection of what happened from that moment until she was out of the cabin. Presumably she had bid him farewell, turned, and walked out, but her memories were faint. Eventually she became aware of the cool breeze, the chirping of grasshoppers, and her own shadow as she walked in the moonlight, and she realized that she had already made it to the end of the forest path.

Still in a daze, she made her way towards the cottage. Unlike normal, she didn't vent her anger by kicking sticks or stones, nor did she run. She simply walked. She practically floated along at an unusually slow pace, like a ghost.

She pumped water from a spigot in the corner of the yard and rinsed her face with it. Unthinkingly, she rubbed and rubbed her lips until they were red and swollen. She kept rinsing her face until her skin was burning, but she couldn't get rid of the strange sensation that still lingered on her lips.

By the time she returned to her room, her face, shawl, and the front of her nightgown were all soaked with cold water. Without thinking of drying them, she slumped down to sit on the edge of her bed.

She wasn't entirely sure what she had just been through, but there was one thing of which she was certain: she never wanted to see him again.

* * *

Matthias snapped his fingers, and the canary that had been sitting calmly in its cage flew towards him.

Leaning against the window frame, he held out his hand, and the bird readily perched on his finger. Its clipped feathers had started to grow back, so it was now capable of flying a bit farther than before. It would need to have them clipped again, but Matthias felt that it wouldn't be necessary to cut them as short as the first time.

While the canary sat on his finger singing, he gazed out the

window. The gardener, Bill Remmer, was in the middle of his work tending the garden. Layla Llewellyn, who used to help him often, was not there. He hadn't seen her for days. Not since the night she had come to find her glasses. Since that incident she had been avoiding Matthias like the plague.

He put the canary back in its cage and put on the red jacket of his hunting outfit.

*I desire her.*

Matthias had come to understand the feeling he had been experiencing. He desired Layla.

There was no need for him to deny it any longer. Layla Llewellyn had grown up to become a beautiful woman, beautiful enough to stimulate a man's desire. He also knew, however, that this sort of desire was only supposed to last a short while before fading away.

Was it really necessary to leave a stain on his life just for the sake of satisfying a fleeting desire?

He kept thinking back to that night, when Layla had been there right in front of him. He had reached a conclusion that night. No. He had concluded that Layla Llewellyn wasn't worthy of these feelings. He was confident that his desire for her was within his control. *Then why...?* Having come to this conclusion, he had let her go. *But why does she still feel the need to avoid me?*

“Preparations are complete for today's hunt, Your Grace,” Hessen said, approaching quietly.

Matthias nodded, took the shotgun that Hessen was holding out for him, and left his bedroom.

* * *

“Did something happen?” Kyle asked, looking at Layla with concern.

She calmly looked up from her notebook, which she was gluing dried wildflowers into. “No,” she readily replied in her usual, clear voice. Furrowing her brow slightly, she quietly asked, “Does it seem like something happened?”

Whenever Kyle saw her make that expression and speak in that voice, his cheeks would start to feel hot. “It's just that you've been cooped up inside for the last few days. I just thought it was strange.” He shrugged casually.

Layla stared blankly at him for a moment, then her face returned to its original expression. Her mouth showed a faint smile, and her bright eyes twinkled.

“Once you found your glasses, I would've thought you'd be out and about all the time, but it's been the opposite,” Kyle added, resting his chin on his hand as he gazed at her.

She giggled softly, then started meticulously writing the characteristics of the flowers she had just glued into her notebook, and the locations where she had found them.

Within a few days she would probably bring that notebook to the library to look up the names of the flowers. Kyle decided that he would accompany her to the library, simply because he wanted to see the smile she would make when she learned each flower's name. She was someone who wanted to know the names of all the world's birds and flowers, and Kyle loved that eccentricity of hers.

After lightly pressing blotting paper against the page to prevent the ink from smudging, she carefully closed the notebook. Her recovered glasses gleamed on her small face.

“Want to go for a walk?” Kyle asked. “We could go to that spot you like with the tree by the river.”

“No,” she immediately replied.

“You used to go there every day. Why did you stop all of a sudden? Did you see something scary in the woods again or something?”

“No, nothing like that. And anyway, we can’t go to the forest today.”

“Why not? Ah, is it a hunting day for the duke?”

Sliding the notebook away from herself to the end of the table, Layla nodded. Soon after, the loud sound of horse hooves could be heard outside.

“Wow, fantastic!” Kyle exclaimed, having run to look out the window.

Duke Herhardt and his companions had passed by the cottage and were now heading into the woods. The chaser and the hunting dogs led the way, while the five young men on horseback followed behind.

Layla moved next to Kyle and looked out the window as well. Duke Herhardt was riding the horse with lustrous, dark-brown fur that he usually rode. His red hunting jacket and shining shotgun were also eye-catching.

“Of course, I don't hunt, Layla. I'll never hunt as long as I live,” Kyle declared. Then suddenly his expression changed.

Just then, Duke Herhardt had looked towards the cottage. Even though Layla had already been hidden behind the curtain, she jumped with surprise and backed away from the window.

She had spent the past ten days trying her hardest to avoid him, not only forgoing trips to the river, but even steering clear of the woods. Even though it made her feel guilty towards Bill, she had stopped helping him out with gardening for the most part as well, doing as much work as she could when the duke went on outings, then disappearing as soon as his car could be seen returning.

She planned to spend the rest of the summer behaving like this, as awkward and unpleasant as it was. Then once autumn rolled around, the duke's engagement would be announced, he would leave for the capital, and Arvis would be peaceful again.

“Are you feeling bad? Would you like to come over to my house?” Kyle asked, noticing with concern that her face had gone pale.

“No, Kyle. I'm fine,” she replied, lightly shaking her head as she sat back down at the table. “They'll be done hunting by this evening, anyway.”

Just as she was casually opening a book, a loud gunshot rang out. The sound of the dogs barking and the horses galloping followed soon behind.

Layla flipped mindlessly through the pages of the book. Her hands were white because she had just unclenched her fists.

She knew she would have to go into the woods that evening. It sounded like there would be a lot of poor birds that would have to be buried.

# Chapter 15:
## Friendly Hunting

After sending his companions back to the mansion, Matthias stopped his horse in the middle of a wide path that ran through the forest. He took off his hat, and his disheveled hair fell down over his forehead. Now that the bloody commotion was over, the forest felt even calmer than usual.

It had been another enjoyable hunt. Matthias had struck every target on which he had set his aim, and each kill had been as thrilling as ever. And yet he was still feeling unsatisfied, because of one bird that was desperately trying to evade him.

After staring in the direction of the cottage for a while, he slowly turned his horse that way. He recalled how whenever a hunt was complete, the little girl who lived on the hunting grounds would go into the forest, sobbing, and bury all the dead birds. This strange behavior had stuck in his memory clearly. What would the girl do now that she was grown up? As he wondered about this, he pointed his gun at a small bird perched on the end of a branch, and...

*Bang!*

Before his shot had finished echoing through the forest, the bird had already fallen to the ground.

Leaving the dead bird where it lay, he advanced his horse. He then repeated this same sequence of actions on another bird. And another. He thus continued pointing and shooting as evening descended on the forest, leaving bird after bloodstained bird in his path.

* * *

*I hate him,* Layla muttered to herself with each new hole she buried for a dead bird. *I hate Duke Herhardt and his vile hobby. I hate him so much.*

Wiping the sweat from her brow, she swallowed the sadness that

she felt rising up her throat. Just when she thought she was finished, she noticed another bloodstained bird carcass a few yards away. She took a deep breath and approached it, shovel in hand.

She wasn't against all forms of killing. Uncle Bill hunted for food, and she herself sometimes slaughtered the chickens and other livestock they raised. What she was unable to understand, however, was how someone could kill animals for fun and leave their carcasses behind.

*When is this summer going to end?* she thought, sighing deeply as she looked forward to the end of what was normally her favorite season. She then buried yet another bird, a linnet with beautiful markings.

Only once she was already deep in the forest did she feel that something was off. Duke Herhardt had always done plenty of hunting every year when he stayed at Arvis, and she had always buried the birds he killed. But she couldn't recall a time when the birds had been located in a straight line at such regular intervals like they were this time. *What's going on?* It was as if the dead birds were arranged into a path.

*Maybe I should turn back...*

Feeling a sense of foreboding, she stopped in her tracks. She looked up and noticed that the sky was a deep red, as if it were on fire. When she lowered her gaze from the sunset, just beyond a thicket of bushes, she saw him. Duke Herhardt was sitting on a tree stump, looking at her.

Her mind went blank, and she started to stumble, when he casually greeted her.

“Hello, Layla.”

Matthias von Herhardt's voice was as soft and smooth as the feathers of the birds he had shot and killed.

* * *

“Matthias seems to be late. I think his companions are all back already,” said Elise von Herhardt, narrowing her eyes as she placed

a card on the table. She was starting to get bored of playing cards, and would have liked to have an early dinner, but her son still hadn't returned from his hunt.

“He said he was going to go for a walk in the woods,” Claudine replied. She was smiling warmly, despite the fact that she had just lost the game.

The other ladies at the table smiled at her with admiration, knowing full well that she had lost on purpose. They could see that the future Duchess Herhardt had tact, manners, and grace. Feeling everyone's gazes, Claudine was also well aware how much they admired her.

“Well anyway, I'm just saying, Matthias certainly seems to like that forest a lot,” Elise said. She then rang a bell to summon the maids, who soon came and started to clear and set the table.

The bored ladies then gathered again at the drawing-room table and chatted as they enjoyed some light refreshments. Even when talking about trivial matters, they employed the utmost conversational etiquette.

“Oh, Claudine, why don't you invite your friends over for a party?”

Claudine's eyes widened at Elise's suggestion. “Me? Throw a party here at Arvis?”

“I'm sure you're getting bored spending every day with us. Wouldn't a change of pace be refreshing?”

“No, I'm not bored of you. Not at all.”

“No need to be startled. I was kidding, Claudine.” Elise's relaxed, smiling face looked so young and beautiful, it was hard to believe she had a son who was about to get engaged. She and Matthias resembled each other quite a bit.

When Elise was duchess, she was admired as one of the top beauties of the entire Berg Empire. And yet she had never captured her husband's affection. This was yet another fact that made Claudine look down on women who she saw as overly attached to the idea of love.

While the previous Duke Herhardt, Matthias's late father, had kept a mistress, like most men in his position, he had not made things awkward for his heir by fathering an illegitimate child. Even though the previous Duke and Duchess Herhardt hadn't loved each other, they had respected each other, and fulfilled their duties faithfully. Theirs was a peaceful family, unblemished by needless ambition or greed. This was what Claudine hoped for from her marriage to Matthias.

“You needn't feel pressure, Claudine. Think of it like a rehearsal. And anyway, if the mansion is filled with young people having a good time, we'll enjoy it too.” Elise's smile brightened noticeably. “Doesn't everyone agree?”

The ladies smiled silently, as they understood that she wasn't actually soliciting their feedback.

“Goodness, you're so generous and thoughtful,” Countess Brandt exclaimed.

The other ladies soon joined in and showered the former duchess with slightly exaggerated praise.

Claudine subtly lowered her head and smiled bashfully. As she considered which friends she would invite to the party, something through the window suddenly drew her attention. The sight of the dusky forest beyond the garden made her think of Layla, the poor orphan girl who lived by those woods. She was well-mannered and knew her place, although she gave off an air of arrogance at times.

“Would it be all right if I invited Layla?”

The ladies furrowed their brows at Claudine's cheerful question.

“You mean the orphan girl that the gardener is taking care of?”

“Yes, her. Layla Llewellyn.”

“Claudine, come now!” Countess Brandt said, looking uncomfortable.

Claudine was unfazed by her mother's glare. “I bet that poor girl has never even been to a formal party. I want to give her a memorable experience she'll enjoy.” Even when speaking assertively like this, Claudine didn't lose her ladylike manners and grace.

“That sounds like a good idea to me,” Dowager Herhardt said with a contented smile. “Do as you wish, Claudine.”

* * *

Layla looked back over the path she had walked while burying the birds. When she turned to face the duke again, there was only one conclusion she could come to.

*He's a psycho.* This was the only way to explain the current situation. Her hands broke into a cold sweat under her bloodstained gloves. Her heart started pounding with fear and anger.

*I've got to get away.* Following the advice that her fear-addled mind was offering, she started to turn around, when she heard the duke speak again.

“Layla.” His face remained composed. “Layla Llewellyn.” He was intoning her name as if it were a mantra he was reciting.

Layla used the shovel she was holding to help herself stand up straighter. She pressed her lips tightly together and flexed the muscles in her legs. She knew it would be no use to try to run away. The duke could easily catch up to her if he wanted. As soon as she realized this, her mind actually grew calmer and clearer.

She bowed her head to him, then raised her trembling gaze and made eye contact with him. While they silently looked into each other's eyes, the sound of the breeze blowing through the forest seemed to grow louder.

“Proceed,” Matthias said, breaking the silence. “Continue your work.” He glanced towards the side of the path, where what seemed to be the final bird he had killed was lying.

Layla plodded towards the spot. The bloody bird had a red string tied to its leg. It was the same string that she had tied to the legs of the baby plovers that had hatched near the Schulter River the previous year.

This bird had migrated all the way to a distant country in the south and then returned, only to lose its life in its native land. All for the simple amusement of that man. Layla silently dug a hole and

buried the bird in it. It was a task she was well practiced at, thanks to that slayer of beautiful birds.

"That string, did you tie it?" he asked as he watched her intently.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I wanted to recognize the birds when they returned from their migration," she replied as she covered the bird with dirt to fill in the hole. "This wasn't the type of reunion I was hoping for, though." Feeling her breath starting to quicken, she looked up and saw Duke Herhardt wearing an utterly calm expression.

"Do you blame me for this?" he asked, crossing his legs as he sat.

The slight mocking smile on his lips caused her patience to run out. "It would be a lie to say I didn't," she replied.

"What's the problem, exactly?" he asked, furrowing his brow. "I was simply hunting my birds, on my hunting ground, on my land."

"But Your Grace, the birds don't know that." *Think of Uncle Bill,* her mind kept telling her, and yet she couldn't help but continue speaking. "To the birds, this is just a forest. It's the place where they were born, grew up, and now live. It's the place they return to year after year after migrating far away for the winter."

"Am I really supposed to understand the details of birds' minds?"

"Maybe not, but…" She removed her bloodstained gardening gloves and caught her breath. "...but I don't think you need to hunt them in such a brutal manner, either." To say these words, she had to summon even more courage than it had taken her all those years ago when she rode a train by herself all the way from Lovita with nothing but her suitcase and a piece of paper with Arvis's address on it. After a moment, a flood of regret washed over her, but she soon realized that the duke was showing no signs of anger or displeasure. His mysterious calmness made her feel even more anxious.

"Layla Llewellyn, the expert on birds' minds," he said after a long pause. "I'm curious, just what do you think hunting is?"

"Pardon?"

“If you don't like the brutal form of hunting that I practice, what should I do instead? Friendly hunting?”

His sarcasm made her blood boil. She gripped her skirt to endure the feeling of outrage. “I apologize, Your Grace. I've said something I shouldn't have. Please forgive my impropriety.”

“Why do you like birds so much?”

“I don't think you would find the answer very interesting, Your Grace.” She lowered her eyes, as she didn't want to see him any longer.

He said nothing in response. Bowing her head deeply, she said, “Now that I've finished my work, I will be going.”

He continued to remain silent. Feeling relieved, she turned around. But just as she started walking, she heard a deafeningly loud gunshot.

Horrified, she turned back around. The duke had his gun pointed at the top of a tree. He lowered the barrel, then turned and stared vacantly at Layla. There was now yet one more bloodstained bird carcass in between them.

“What to do, Layla?” He casually sat back down on the tree stump. “It seems your work is not finished after all.”

# Chapter 16:
## Something That is Nothing

As the sun began to set, the forest quickly grew dark.

Layla was staring with unfocused eyes at the dead bird, and Matthias was gazing at her. Several minutes of silence had passed, but he wasn't worried. Layla was still in his sight, and it didn't seem like she would run away anytime soon.

Lifting her head, Layla finally started to speak “Just...” as she glared at him, the anger in her eyes was clear even through the darkness.

Matthias wasn't bothered by the fact that she was boldly daring to stare right into his eyes. He preferred that rather than when she avoided eye contact entirely.

She continued, “Just tell me. Tell me what wrong I committed against you.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes. What did I do to you that made you feel the need to... punish me in this horrible way?”

“I haven't punished you,” he solemnly replied, “I did my work, and you did yours. It's as simple as that, Layla.” This was how he really felt. “As for a wrong that you have committed, I don't know about that...” He sank into thought for a moment, then looked at her with tranquil eyes and asked, “Why do you like birds so much?” It was the same question he had asked her earlier, and he asked it in an unchanged tone of voice.

Layla opened her eyes and looked up at the darkening sky, then down at the dead bird, then back at Matthias. There was a slight trembling in her shoulders, but in her eyes there was still a piercing glare.

Matthias found this at once amusing and irksome.

“Because they're always nearby,” she flatly replied. She was clearly still angry, but her tone was unemotional. “Ever since I was

young, I've roamed around all over, but wherever I went, whenever I went, there were always birds. Some birds would leave with the changing of the seasons, but if I waited long enough, they would return. Birds always come back to me." Her voice grew calmer as she spoke, and softer as well. "There are birds in every season. In every location, too. They are the world's freest, most beautiful creatures, and they are always nearby. That's why I like them."

"Really?"

"Yes. Although I'm sure that's all meaningless to you, Your Grace." She was on the verge of tears.

Matthias snickered quietly and stood up. He had just realized that it was almost time for the banquet.

Seeing that he seemed to be preparing to leave, Layla urgently asked, "You're not going to keep hunting like this, are you, Your Grace?"

"I will when necessary," he replied without skipping a beat. He was pleased by the despair, fear, and anger that this provoked in her face. He was about to brush past her and leave, but he changed his mind and decided to stay a bit longer. "Layla, I want everything in my world to be in its proper place. I don't want anyone needlessly hiding or running away."

"What do you mean, Your Grace?"

"Stay where you belong."

"Where I belong...? I don't know what place you're talking about."

"Think about it."

"Your Grace…?"

"Have you got it? If you find the answer, maybe I'll start practicing the friendly hunting you requested." He then walked away, leaving Layla behind in a daze.

He didn't want anything in particular from Layla. He just wanted her to stay in her place. As the orphan living in his forest. As the inquisitive schoolgirl. And soon, as a teacher. Those roles constituted her proper place.

He mounted his horse, then looked back toward the thicket of bushes. Layla was crouched down in front of the dead bird. Her cheeks were glistening, presumably from tears. This gave him a feeling of contentment.

He had been born into a world of perfect order, and he had become its master. Within that order, everything was simple and clear. He didn't find it difficult at all to live in accordance with the expectations of his role. Sometimes it was so easy as to be boring. To his grandmother and mother, he was a worthy heir. To his staff, he was a generous master. On the battlefield, he was a noble soldier. To the directors of his company, he was a capable businessman.

In all relationships in his life, there was a proper role for him to play, and he played all these roles willingly. The same was true of the corresponding parties on the other side of each such relationship. They played their proper roles, with the appropriate attitudes and feelings dictated by the world's order. These were the feelings that Matthias had seen, heard, and learned.

*But what about that poor orphan who lives in my forest?* He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Layla. *She is nothing.*

He smiled at the ease with which he had reached this conclusion.

It was the first time that he had encountered something that was nothing. There had never been room in his life for an entity without a pre-ordained role.

Now that there was such an entity, he felt strange, but not in a bad way. In fact, the emotions that that woman who was nothing was displaying were bringing him joy, even though they were outside the normal order of things in his world. It was the same joy that he felt when he killed a flying bird in one shot.

Her tears were best of all. He liked seeing Layla cry. She was pretty when she cried. Pretty enough that he wanted to make her cry again and again.

He left the forest feeling refreshed.

He then returned to the mansion and repeated the same routine

he had been through countless times before. A lively dinner. Exquisitely vapid conversation. Cold champagne and bubbly laughter.

The summer night soon passed, and he woke up the following morning to the thought that perhaps a “friendly” hunting session could be worth trying. He looked out the window at the rose garden down below.

Layla was there. As always, she was quietly helping the gardener with his work.

*See?*

He turned away from the window with a smile.

*It's that easy, Layla.*

* * *

“Thank you, Layla.” Claudine said. Her friend also conveyed her gratitude with a slight smile.

“No problem, Miss.” Layla replied, bowing her head respectfully. She clasped her hands together. There were green smudges on her fingers from cutting flowers. There were also a few scratches from rose thorns. “I'll be on my way th-”

“Can you pick some of those red roses over there for me too?” Claudine asked, cutting Layla off. “One bouquet's worth should be plenty.”

Layla turned and looked where Claudine was pointing. It was a bed of magnificent red roses blooming in the center of the garden. “Yes, Miss.” she replied, obediently following orders as always. She picked up her basket and clippers again.

Claudine quietly watched her as she made her way to the rose bed.

Claudine had been taking a walk in the garden with a friend of hers who was visiting when they had run into Layla, who was busily helping the gardener after being nowhere in sight for several days.

Rather than going to have tea as originally planned, she asked

her friend if she would like to arrange flowers instead. Emilia happily agreed to the change in plans, and Claudine had maids prepare flower-arranging equipment under the rose-covered pergola.

She then sent a maid to summon Layla. It was something she had done since they were children. Claudine would sit under the pergola and arrange flowers, while Layla's job was to pick the flowers and bring them to her.

Layla wasn't good enough to be her playmate, but she was an excellent errand-girl. Sometimes when Claudine was really bored she would summon Layla to chat as well.

“That girl behaves very politely, but doesn't she seem a little uppity?” Emilia asked, pouting at Claudine. “It seems like she doesn't quite know her place.”

“Don't say that, Emilia. Layla has had a tough life,” Claudine replied, frowning slightly as she trimmed the roses Layla had just handed her. “You're not wrong about her shortcomings, but we should try to be tolerant of her.”

Emilia giggled. “Well, aren't you being a little too lenient with her? She's just the help, after all.”

“Attendants who faithfully perform their duties are deserving of our respect,” Claudine said in a gentle, quiet tone. She placed the trimmed flowers one by one into a blue porcelain vase.

Before long, Layla returned with a bouquet's worth of red roses. She once again placed them on the table with flawless etiquette.

Claudine stopped trimming for a moment and looked at her. Emilia's criticism about her was right. Thinking back on all her interactions with her over the years, she couldn't deny it.

She thought she might know the reason for this quality as well. It seemed that Layla's obedient behavior came less from reverence than from indifference. Many top noble daughters were dying to be friends with Claudine von Brandt, but Layla never seemed particularly excited or happy to be in her presence. She rarely seemed concerned with how she appeared to Claudine, and never

tried to flatter her.

Instead, she generally seemed like she was quietly enduring Claudine as she obediently followed her orders.

Claudine wasn't used to this sort of indifference from anyone. It was slightly embarrassing to realize that the only person who behaved like this around her was that orphan.

Nonetheless, she smiled at her and said, “Good job, Layla.”

Layla bowed her head deeply and took a few steps back, and the maid who had been waiting nearby approached her. Claudine had been looking forward to this moment most of all. It was the moment when that entitled orphan would receive a gold coin, at which time her eyes would shine with true emotion for once.

Even after all this time, Layla still hadn't learned how to keep her cool in such moments. Claudine watched with satisfaction as Layla's hand quivered like she was holding a hot potato after receiving the coin. Today Claudine was going to give her an additional gift. She was going to give that poor girl a ticket to a memorable experience.

Layla's eyes widened as she looked at the party invitation that the maid had handed her along with the coin. “Is this for me?” she asked Claudine.

“Yes. I made a special request on your behalf, and both Dowager Herhardt and Lady Elise gave their permission.”

“But, Miss-”

“I'd really like you to come, Layla,” Claudine said, giggling.

As Layla's face grew pale, Claudine's smile brightened.

“I'm sure you wouldn't reject my invitation, Layla,” she said as if talking to an old friend. She then turned away from Layla.

*I've got to tame that stubborn girl before I become Duchess of Arvis,* she resolved as she started trimming the roses again. Her skillfully-arranged bouquet was flawlessly beautiful.

# Chapter 17:
## Surprise Gift

Word quickly spread among the Arvis staff that Layla, the girl that Mr. Remmer was taking care of, had been invited to a party in the mansion. Upon hearing about it, most reacted at first with disbelief, and then with sympathy for poor Layla. Those of the staff who had been working at Arvis for a long time all knew that Lady Claudine treated Layla like she was her puppy.

“This is just between you and me, but I don't know why nobles are so mean,” said Chef Mona. As soon as she heard the news, she had run over to Bill's cottage to tell him about it. She was still panting.

Bill, who had been taking a break in the shade to escape the midday heat, was shocked when he heard the news.

“They claim to be considerate,” Mona continued, “but think how daunting a situation like that would be for Layla.”

“Layla wouldn't be daunted by a party,” Bill replied. “She just has to show up, mingle for a bit, and come back home.”

“Oh, Bill. You don't know what you're talking about. Why are men so clueless?!”

Feeling Mona's glare, Bill scratched the back of his neck and stubbed out his cigarette.

“I think we should teach them a lesson,” Mona said.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“You know what I mean, Bill. Let's send Layla to the party dressed up so lavishly that it'll knock those noblewomen down a peg or two.”

“But, is that really necess-”

“Come on, Bill. What did you expect her to wear? Her school uniform?”

*What would be wrong with that?* Bill wondered, taken aback by Mona’s passionate intensity.

Mona clicked her tongue and shook her head, saying, “Look, Bill. After all these years, don't you think you should know how to take care of your daughter?”

“What do you mean, *my daughter*? She's not my daughter. I'm still thinking about where to send her...”

“Sure you are. You'll be thinking about it on her wedding day, you'll be thinking about it when you hold her first child, you'll even still be thinking about it when you're lying in your coffin.”

“What's this talk about marriage? She's just a girl! You're talking nonsense.”

Seeing that Bill was getting angry, Mona spoke in a softer tone. “You say she's not your daughter, and yet you react like this? I really don't get you, Bill.”

“If you're going to persist with this silly talk, you can leave.”

“Come on, let's buy her a pretty dress, Bill. As a sort of surprise gift. Girls love dresses—think how happy she'll be!” In a commanding tone, she added, “Layla isn't the type to ask for a dress, and you're certainly not the type to take the initiative and buy one for her, so I'm going to have to step in and help.”

“How are you going to help…?”

“You just give me the money, and I'll take care of the rest.”

“Fine, have it your way,” he grumbled. He then went into the cottage and came out with his money bag. He kept all his savings at home because he didn't trust banks.

Mona made sure to get enough money not only for a dress, but for shoes as well.

Just then, Layla came back from attending to the goat pen. Bill and Mona quickly hid the money and feigned innocence.

Layla offered Mona a cup of tea, but Mona refused and left the cottage. Meanwhile, Bill quietly sat on top of his money bag to hide it.

“Was Chef Mona nagging to you about me again? I know she hasn't seen me climbing any trees lately, so what's she upset about this time?” Layla asked as she sat in the chair next to Bill's.

“Don't worry, it's nothing like that,” Bill replied before awkwardly clearing his throat a relighting his cigarette.

Layla smiled. “Well I'm glad.” She took off her hat and sat deeper in the chair.

Layla had been wearing the straw hat Bill had given her practically every day this summer. It delighted Bill every time he saw her in it. It occurred to her that it would likely delight him far more to see her in a pretty dress he had paid for, so he felt no resentment towards Mona for insisting that he give her the money for it. “Layla,” he suddenly said.

Layla turned to look at him.

“What are you going to do? About the party at the mansion, I mean.”

“I'm just going to stop by and say hello, then leave. The Ettmans were also invited, so I'm going to go with Kyle.”

“Really? I guess that loafer is finally returning the favor after all the food he's eaten here.” Bill was very relieved to hear that Kyle would be attending the party. Even though he was always feigning resentment towards him, he actually trusted him deeply. “There must be something you need, though, right? A dress to wear, something like that?”

“I'm fine, Uncle Bill,” Layla replied, laughing quietly. It was the same gentle laugh that she had been making since she was young, and it always made Bill feel slightly uncomfortable.

“You're fine? What are you going to wear, your school uniform?”

“That's not a bad idea,” she replied, giggling playfully.

Seeing how carefree she was made Bill feel uncertain. *Am I really clueless about how to take care of my daughter?* “No,” he muttered in surprise at the thought. What am I thinking? He shook his head. *She's not my daughter.*

Layla was looking at him with a puzzled expression.

Bill felt even more uncomfortable when he noticed the glittering frames of her glasses. He was well aware of how she tried to avoid causing him any trouble or doing anything that would make her

indebted to him. He understood these feelings and even sympathized with them to some degree. But he didn't know how to express this to her. Anything he tried to say came out sounding too blunt and gruff.

In any case, this made him all the more grateful that Mona had taken it upon herself to help him do such a kind thing for Layla, even if Mona could be a bit overbearing.

He gathered his courage and tried talking to Layla again. “Layla... It sure is hot today.” Once again he was unsuccessful in sharing his feelings. Feeling embarrassed at his needless comment, he cleared his throat.

Laughing tenderly, Layla reached over and grasped his hand on his chair's armrest.

*Gosh, I was trying to comfort her, and now she's comforting me instead,* Bill thought. He looked down at her little hand and felt slightly abashed, but he didn't shake it off.

Layla smiled at him warmly, though he didn't know why.

*Goodness, what a pretty smile she has.*

* * *

Layla woke up from a very sound sleep. The sun had only just begun to rise, and her room was still filled with inky darkness.

Lying motionless in bed, she slowly looked around, taking in everything in the room—the familiar ceiling; the cream-colored curtains covering the window; the old desk with a few books on it; the soft blanket that gave off a faint scent of sunshine...

She let out a sigh of relief when she realized where she was. *Phew, I'm in my room.*

She had had her first nightmare in a long time. It took place shortly after she had become an orphan, when she was being passed between relatives' homes. Back then, her life had been like a series of nightmares. Things had been much better since she had moved in with Bill, but she still vividly recalled the horrible time she had spent in the house where her fear of water had been instilled in her.

*"This is all because of that girl!"*

Whenever the uncle at that house was drunk, he would vent his anger at her. He was a quiet, shy man when sober, but Layla mostly remembered the way he was when drunk, which happened at least five days per week. On days he had lost money gambling he became more aggressive, and would scream curses at Layla and beat her.

He was awful. She hated him. But as an orphan with nowhere else to go, she had no choice but to endure it.

She tried as hard as she could in that house. She never rested from helping out with the housework, and she ate very little. She tried to be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible, as if she were a piece of furniture. On the day she was finally kicked out of the house, her aunt gave her a few cookies in a paper bag. Layla looked at her aunt's bruised face and thanked her for the cookies.

In the stagecoach on the way to the next relative's home, she took one of the cookies out of the bag and ate it. The chocolate chip cookie was so delicious it made her want to cry.

But she didn't cry. She spent the whole trip practicing the placid smile of an obedient child. The more she felt like crying, the wider she smiled. She knew that no one liked a crying orphan. Each time she was kicked out of another house, she seemed to get a little better at smiling.

But on the day she had to cross the border into Berg all by herself, she found it hard to smile. She was still young, but she believed that the address that she was holding in her hand was her last hope. She was sure that if this home didn't work out, she would be put in an orphanage.

Nonetheless, she tried her hardest to smile. To this day, she still remembered the look of compassion and pity in Uncle Bill's eyes when she met him; and she still remembered crossing the threshold into the room she was lying in right now. That day, when she finally gained a family and a home, was one she would likely never forget as long as she lived.

*Yes, everything will be all right.*

Feeling comforted by her thoughts, she sat up and got out of bed.

The party was tonight. While it would be untrue to say she was wholly unconcerned, she didn't want to dwell on her anxieties about it. She intended to walk confidently in, spend a short while mingling, and then leave.

Claudine likely had no idea that Layla would readily do anything necessary to protect Uncle Bill and this cozy cottage.

She opened the window, then hastily washed her face and got dressed. She flung open her door and saw Bill about to leave for the garden. Smiling brightly, she walked towards him and said, “Let's go together, Uncle Bill!”

* * *

The mansion was ready to receive guests by midafternoon. It was going to be a large party, but big events were an everyday thing for the Arvis staff.

They each carried out their responsibilities at their respective stations with skill and finesse. All that remained was for the sun to set so that the lavish party could begin. No one at Arvis had any doubt that the party would be a success. Like everything that bore the Herhardt family name, this soiree would be perfect.

Matthias stepped out of his dressing room wearing his evening coat. His hair was slicked back, exposing his forehead and eyebrows, which gave him a cold, debonair look. The slight smile on his lips did little to dispel the flinty look in his eyes or the sharp curve of his face.

“Everything went according to your instructions, Your Grace,” Hessen quietly reported.

Holding a cigarette, Matthias raised one eyebrow slightly as he turned to face Hessen.

“They left about an hour ago, so the items should have been delivered by now,” Hessen added.

“I see,” Matthias replied, nodding with a slight smile as he lit the cigarette. “Well done.”

Hessen bowed his head in response.

Matthias had found out that Claudine had invited Layla to the party when he heard his Mother praising Claudine for the compassion and kindness of the gesture. At least, he was fairly certain that's what she had been saying.

Matthias had raised no objections. He figured that it would be entertaining to see how Layla would do at an aristocratic party. He assumed she would show up in a shabby dress, and Claudine would show her the utmost pity and sympathy.

He well understood what it was about Layla that had spurred Claudine to invite her to the party. Layla often came across as arrogant, and Claudine would be sure to enjoy cutting her down to size.

Once he had figured out what Claudine wanted, however, he didn't want to let her have it. He wanted to reserve that pleasure for himself. Matthias von Herhardt never shared his possessions with others.

“What shall I do with that, Your Grace?” Hessen asked, pointing to a box by the fireplace. It contained the gift that the chef had ordered on Bill's behalf.

Originally it was supposed to be delivered to Bill's cabin, but Matthias had had Hessen intercept it and bring it here instead. He had then had Hessen deliver a different gift to Bill's cottage.

Matthias took a slow drag from his cigarette as he gazed at the box. Even without opening it, it wasn't hard to guess its contents. As the smoke drifted out of his mouth, he calmly replied, “Throw it away.”

# Chapter 18:
## Emerald

Layla's eyes widened when she saw what was in the box. “Uncle Bill, this is way over the top,” she said with a quivering voice.

Equally surprised, Bill didn't know how to respond.

“This must've cost a fortune! How much did you spend on it?” she asked, looking disapprovingly at Bill.

“Well, actually... it... wasn't that expensive! You're making too big a deal over it,” he replied, barely able to gather his composure.

The dress that Chef Mona had ordered for Layla had arrived on the day of the party. Bill had expected that the mailman would have brought it, but it was instead delivered by a young man, who he assumed was an employee from the dress shop.

Seeing how well-dressed the employee was, Bill wondered if the dress shop Mona had chosen was too pricey. Even so, he wasn't prepared for what was inside the box. He knew nothing about women's fashion, and yet even he could tell that the white dress embroidered with gold thread was extremely luxurious and beautiful, as were the shoes, gloves, and necklace.

*Wait, how much money did I give Chef Mona?* Bill started counting on his fingers. *I don't recall giving her money for a necklace...* The numbers didn't add up, so he started calculating again. As he did so, Layla firmly put the lid back on the box.

“What's the matter?” Bill asked. “Don't you like them?”

“Of course, I like them.”

“Then what's the problem?”

“Let's return them. I don't want you spending so much money on an outfit I'll only wear once. I'm not even planning to stay at the party for very long.”

Despite Mona's assurance that she would love the outfit, Layla looked deeply concerned.

Bill's expression hardened. “Layla, if you don't wear these to the

party, I don't want to see you again. I know you don't want to feel indebted to me, but I don't like you being completely closed off from me like this." He slowly rose from his seat. "I know it looks fancy, but it's just a cheap imitation. I'd love to give you everything in the world, but you know I couldn't afford to."

"Uncle Bill..."

He was now red in the face with anger. "If you're not going to wear these things, I'll use them as kindling for the fire. And then I won't see you again, Layla." He stormed out the front door of the cottage. He paced around the flower beds for a while, chain-smoking, until finally he was hit with a wave of regret over the harsh things he had said to Layla. No matter how upset he was about the situation, he knew it wasn't right to tell her he never wanted to see her again. As he began to consider going back inside, Kyle suddenly appeared, striding toward the cottage from across the road in a tailcoat.

Previously Bill had only ever seen Kyle as an immature kid who tried to act like an adult. But seeing him now, dressed to the nines, he finally thought Kyle looked like a man.

"Hi, Mr. Remmer. Is Layla ready?" Kyle asked, smiling excitedly.

"How should I know?"

"Pardon? Isn't she home? The party is about to start..."

"Oh, she's home, it's just..." Bill hesitated, not sure how to explain what was going on between him and Layla.

Just then, the door creaked open. When the two men turned to look, they were astounded at what they saw.

Layla was standing there, but she looked unlike she had ever looked before.

* * *

"Kyle, don't you think I look a little strange?" she asked, frowning. "I feel so awkward wearing this, and-"

"You look pretty," Kyle said, cutting her off. He barely felt capable of speech, but he was able to confidently say, "You look

beautiful, Layla. I mean it." The childlike smile had left his face. He was now blushing. He had heard that Bill was getting her a new dress for the party, but he had no idea it would look like this. Based on the straw hat Bill had previously picked out for her, he had been worried about his fashion sense, but this was exquisite.

"Hey, Kyle, snap out of it," Bill said, clicking his tongue at the dazed Kyle and patting him forcefully on the back. "I'm letting you escort her tonight," he said, looking somberly at him. "That means you need to take responsibility for her safety. Are you up to the task?"

"Of course, Mr. Remmer," Kyle replied, looking back at Bill with an equally somber face. "She's safe with me!"

Bill burst into laughter as he watched the red-faced young man making this solemn vow. Meanwhile, Layla cautiously stepped towards Kyle.

Kyle took a few deep breaths to calm himself down, then politely extended his hand to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Keeping his hand outstretched, Kyle replied, "We're going to a party. You're my companion, right?"

"Yeah."

"So..." Gathering his courage, he took her by the hand and placed her arm in his. "W-we're supposed to walk together like th-this." He was stammering a little out of nervousness.

Layla thought for a moment, then nodded and linked her arm deeper into his. "Sounds good. Let's go, Kyle."

Gazing at her sunny smile, Kyle thought, *I'll never forget this moment as long as I live.*

* * *

Layla Llewellyn showed up at the party with the doctor's son. Matthias turned from welcoming guests and suddenly saw her entering, escorted by Kyle Ettman. Her appearance proved at once that Hessen was a perfect butler in all respects. She looked beautiful

in the clothes and accessories he had provided. This was true even though it was clear that she had simply put on the outfit, without bothering to put on makeup or do her hair.

Matthias's gaze went up slowly from the shoes, to the dress, finally coming to rest on the necklace hanging around her smooth neck. It was a beautiful necklace made of pearls and emeralds.

Hessen had chosen the rest of the outfit, but the necklace had been Matthias's selection. It had happened by chance. On his way to an appointment at the hotel, he had seen the necklace in the display window of a jewelry shop. The bright-green color of the exquisitely cut emeralds had left quite an impression on him. Thus, in the car on the way back to the estate, he had instructed Hessen to buy the necklace.

Feeling someone's gaze on her, Layla suddenly turned her head. Her eyes, which were green like a summer forest, stopped directly on Matthias's face. Without her glasses, she had to squint before she could recognize him.

While Matthias remained unfazed, Layla flinched and looked away. She grasped the arm of the boy she was with tighter and moved behind him as if to hide.

"It's been a long time, Duke Herhardt."

Hearing a familiar voice, Matthias turned and greeted the smiling guest, exchanging a few brief pleasantries. Even though his mind was elsewhere, he was able to perform social tasks like this flawlessly.

By the time he turned back towards Layla, she and the boy were already on the far side of the hall. Kyle seemed very proud to be escorting Layla. He was leading her around as if she were his.

* * *

"This is Layla. She's my friend," said Claudine after bringing Layla to yet another group of young ladies.

"Hello, I am Layla Llewellyn," Layla said, playing her part as always by curtsying politely. She was displaying no will or emotion

of her own; it was like she was Claudine's doll.

Claudine's smile widened as she continued to introduce Layla, telling the ladies how despite her disadvantages she was very kind, smart, and virtuous. “Layla is studying to become a teacher. Isn't that wonderful?”

The ladies reacted with delight, and began praising and admiring Layla as well. Of course, the real object of their praise and admiration was not Layla, but rather Lady Claudine for being so kind as to treat the poor orphan girl like her friend. They all knew that Claudine and Layla could never really be friends. But they certainly didn't hold it against Claudine for saying that they were.

“Oh, Claudine, I heard you're soon going to be engaged,” said one of the ladies, gracefully changing the subject once enough had been said about the orphan who was going to become a teacher.

Immediately all the ladies' interest shifted to Lady Claudine's engagement.

Claudine assumed a modest, humble attitude. She knew it would be improper to behave like she was already Duchess Herhardt when her engagement hadn't even been formally announced yet.

“Why, here comes Duke Herhardt!” a lady standing across from Claudine exclaimed.

Everyone turned to look in the direction the lady was pointing. Layla, who had been maintaining a polite smile as Claudine took her from group to group, also looked with widened eyes in the same direction.

Matthias brushed by Layla and stood next to Claudine. Claudine then casually linked arms with him. Layla's face was distinctly paler than before as she watched them out of the corner of her eye.

“Duke Herhardt, these are my friends,” Claudine said.

Matthias gracefully greeted each of the ladies as Claudine introduced them in turn. His gaze then came to rest on Layla, who was standing at the edge of the group.

“This is Layla,” Claudine said, clutching Matthias's arm a little tighter. “I bet you didn't recognize her. She looks so different from

normal, I hardly recognized her myself."

Layla blushed with embarrassment at Claudine's backhanded compliment. Normally she wasn't easily upset by insults or criticism, but it was different when she was around Matthias.

A silence descended on the group, and was soon broken by a warm voice saying, "Please excuse me." It was Kyle. After Claudine had taken Layla from him, he had been hovering near them with a disapproving look on his face. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but would it be all right if I take my companion back?" Without hesitation, he reached out and held onto Layla's hand.

Layla seemed a little startled but didn't pull her hand away. Instead, she seemed relieved, like a lost child that had just found her parents.

"My friends are also looking forward to meeting her, you see," Kyle added. His affable demeanor contrasted starkly with the cold look he flashed at Claudine.

"Well, I certainly can't say no to that. We don't have a monopoly on Layla," Claudine said with a nod, glancing at Matthias.

Matthias was looking at Layla and Kyle with an emotionless face.

"Thank you, Lady Claudine. And thank you as well, Your Grace," Kyle said, bowing courteously. "Let's go, Layla." Only when Kyle made eye contact with Layla did he start smiling. That bright, tender smile made something clear to Claudine: he loved Layla.

He was about as tall as Matthias. Standing next to him, Layla looked even smaller and more slender than usual. He seemed to cherish her like she was his treasure.

*But how does Layla feel about him?* Claudine wondered, looking closely at Layla.

Layla was smiling back at Kyle. Of course, she always smiled when she was around Claudine as well. But this was the first time Claudine had seen such a bright, contented smile on her face. It seemed fair to describe it as the smile of someone who was in love.

*So she's in love with the doctor's son, not Duke Herhardt?* Claudine thought. Then is he also the reason she's been acting like a princess?

While Claudine mulled over these confusing thoughts, Layla and Kyle turned away.

As they did so, Claudine impulsively shouted, “Ah, Layla!”

The light from the chandelier shone down on Layla.

“I wanted to say,” Claudine continued, “you look very pretty tonight. Especially that necklace.”

“Pardon? Ah... yes. Thank you, Miss,” Layla replied, awkwardly feeling at her neck.

The long necklace complemented her beauty exquisitely. The emeralds were the same shade of green as her eyes, and each was surrounded in a flower-petal pattern by tiny jewels that appeared to be flawless diamonds. The delicate, milky-white pearls were similarly decorated. The gemstones were far too beautiful and immaculate to be fake.

Claudine knew that Kyle Ettman's father was relatively wealthy, but could a mere doctor's son really afford to buy a necklace like that for Layla?

“Don't you think so, Duke Herhardt?” Claudine asked Matthias, smiling.

Without delay, Matthias replied, “Yes, indeed.” His face was calm.

# Chapter 19:
## Kiss Me

Kyle brought Layla outside to the terrace that faced the rose garden. Only then did Layla realize how noisy the fancy party inside had been. Leaning against the marble railing, she breathed a sigh of relief and said, “Thanks, Kyle. Thank you so much.”

Rather than smiling in response as she had expected, Kyle had a sour expression on his face.

“Kyle?”

“Why do you put up with that?”

“Huh?”

“She drags you around and shows you off to her friends like you're her pet. Why do you let her do that? It's not like the smart, self-respecting Layla Llewellyn I know.”

Unlike Kyle's uncharacteristic anger, Layla smiled casually. “Who cares, Kyle? Anyway, nothing she said about me was untrue. I'm an orphan, I'm indebted to Uncle Bill, and I'm going to become a teacher.”

“I thought I knew you, Layla...”

“I contain multitudes, Mr. Ettman.”

This playful response finally elicited laughter from Kyle. “You're always saying silly things, Layla.”

“You can go now, Kyle. I'm doing just fine. Really.”

“Where would I go?”

“You must have lots of important people to meet. Not to mention all your friends who are here.”

“No thanks,” he replied with an irritated wave of his hand. He leaned against the railing next to her.

“Don't be like that, Kyle...”

“Layla, I'm here at this party as your companion.” He slowly turned his head towards her. The warm look in his brown eyes was visible even in the darkness. “So I'm going to stay with you.” A

smile slowly spread across his face. “That's what I want.”

A gentle breeze brought the sweet smell of roses from the garden. She almost said something in response, then shut her mouth and ran her fingers over the railing.

“Why aren't you responding?” he gently asked.

She looked awkwardly down at the sharp tips of her shoes and replied, “I don't know.”

“Are you embarrassed in front of me? I've never seen you like that.”

“I'm not embarrassed, Kyle.”

“I think you're blushing...”

“No!” She put her hands to her cheeks.

“Haha, fooled you,” he said.

She laughed along with him. Just then, Mrs. Ettman, who had been roaming the hall looking for her son, found Kyle and Layla outside on the terrace. Approaching them, she let out a sigh and asked, “Kyle, what are you doing out here?”

Layla quickly straightened her posture, then lowered her head to greet Mrs. Ettman, who nodded briefly at her before turning back to her son. “There's a lot of people waiting to see you in there.”

“They want to see Father, not me,” Kyle replied, giggling.

Mrs. Ettman's face grew even sterner. “Kyle Ettman, do you think I'm kidding around?”

“You know that's not what I meant, Mom.”

“Let's go. Dowager Herhardt is looking for you. You don't want to make her wait, do you?” It was clear that Mrs. Ettman was not going to put up with any more resistance.

“See you later, Kyle,” Layla sheepishly said.

Dowager Herhardt adored the only son of the family doctor, and Layla was well aware of how proud Mrs. Ettman was of this fact. “I'll wait here,” she added, smiling brightly to reassure Kyle.

Finally smiling at her, Mrs. Ettman said, “Thank you, Layla.” Her eyes were the same shade of brown as Kyle's, but they always looked at Layla with a cold expression.

Layla was well aware of this as well. Kyle reluctantly trudged away, looking over his shoulder back at Layla several times. Layla waved at him, keeping her hand near her side.

“Wait for me!” he shouted, frowning. “You have to wait for me, Layla!”

Layla wanted to tell him she would, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything. All she could manage was to smile and wave a little harder than before.

Once Kyle and his Mother were inside, the terrace was quiet again. Glancing through the windows into the hall, Layla could sense the carefree atmosphere of the party, as the beautiful light of the chandelier blended with the muffled sounds of music and laughter. Her vision was blurry because she had left her glasses at home, but that only made the impression more dreamlike and picturesque.

Her work at the party was now done. She breathed a cheerful sigh of relief. Only now that she was able to relax did she become aware of her strange appearance. She moved her leg a bit, and the dress's skirt and the ribbon adorning its waist fluttered. This amused her, so she started raising herself onto her tiptoes and lowering back down again so that she could see the undulating motion of her dress.

The white dress embroidered with gold thread looked beautiful on this dreamy night. The smooth, soft fabric tickled her as it brushed against her skin. Then she became aware of the necklace. The timid smile left her face as she felt it with her hand.

*Why did Lady Claudine say that?*

She assumed that Claudine's comment about the necklace had been some sort of sophisticated way of putting her in her place, but she didn't mind. Uncle Bill's gift was dazzlingly pretty. No matter what anyone said, this was how Layla felt, and that was enough for her.

Smiling again, she looked up and saw a tall man stepping out onto the terrace. Thinking Kyle had already returned, she got

excited, but then she realized it wasn't him and her heart sank.

It was Duke Herhardt. And Lady Claudine was with him.

* * *

"The evening breeze is refreshing, isn't it?"

Claudine asked, breathing in deeply. She was acting innocent, as if she had truly brought Matthias out onto the terrace just to feel the breeze. "I love summer because the nights are so beautiful. What about you, Duke Herhardt?" She lightly gripped the marble railing and smiled. Her eyes were pointed not at Matthias, but at her real reason for coming outside—Layla, who was standing at the other end of the railing.

"I don't like the summer all that much, my lady," Matthias replied, standing next to Claudine. He surveyed the garden full of roses in full bloom, and his eyes quickly passed over Layla's face. He seemed flustered when he noticed the unexpected third party.

"Really? I always thought you liked the summer," Claudine replied. She was now facing Matthias, with her back to Layla. "Now that I think about it, you're a rather aloof man, Duke. I hope you know I don't mean that as an insult, though." With her hands behind her back, she took a step towards him. They were now close enough to feel each other's breath. "To be honest, I like your aloofness," Claudine continued. "Your even temperament is very aristocratic and gentlemanly."

"I'm glad that you like it," he replied, not backing away from her.

Looking straight into his eyes, she boldly said, "Kiss me."

He looked silently back at her.

"While I do like your aloofness," she continued, "don't you think our relationship could do with a little passion as well?" She tilted her head, and the thick curls of her brown hair bobbed lightly. "After all, we're going to be engaged, and then married..."

"A little passion…?" Matthias narrowed his eyes for a moment before nodding. "Yes, that's reasonable." Without any seeming hesitancy, he reached out and held her cheeks in his hands.

Claudine looked startled at first, but soon closed her eyes naturally.

Observing the shadows cast on her face by her long eyelashes, Matthias's gaze drifted across to the other end of the terrace. Just then, Layla, who had been anxiously standing in place, looked back at him.

Keeping his eyes fixed on Layla, he slowly pressed his lips against Claudine's.

Just as Claudine wanted, Layla was faithfully fulfilling her role as onlooker, staring at them in a daze, her body frozen. Neither the considerable distance nor the darkness were enough to obscure her blushing cheeks.

Throughout the highly restrained kiss, Matthias's gaze remained on Layla. Her eyes, staring helplessly straight back at him, were as bright and clear as the moonlight.

When she finally managed to look away, the light kiss ended as well. As Claudine slowly opened her eyes with a subtle smile, Layla rushed down the steps leading to the garden.

Matthias courteously extended his hand to Claudine. “Let's go.”

Claudine casually put her hand in his. “I'm certain, Duke Herhardt,” she said as they re-entered the hall. “I'm certain that we will be a happy couple.”

* * *

Layla frantically ran down the stairs. She knew they wouldn't follow her, and yet she couldn't slow her pace.

The sound of her shoes' heels clicking against the paved walking path disturbed the tranquility of the night around the garden. She finally came to a stop once she reached the huge fountain at the center of the garden. As she caught her breath, the pain returned to her feet, which she had forgotten about while she was making her escape.

“Ah...” She winced in pain as she slipped the high-heeled shoe off one of her feet. Her foot was covered in scratches and blisters. The

heel had started to bleed from a spot where the skin had been chafed away. She felt like running back to the cottage, but ultimately she decided against that and turned back towards the mansion.

She had promised Kyle that she would wait for him. If she was going to leave, she owed it to him to at least tell him first. However, she had no desire to go back into the strange, uncomfortable world inside that brightly-lit mansion.

Instead, she limped along to the right of the walking path, where the rose-covered pergola was located. She planned to wait in the garden until Kyle came outside again, at which time she would head back towards the mansion.

*But would it be all right for me to sit down?* she wondered, looking at the bench.

The pergola was covered with roses expertly cultivated by Uncle Bill, and yet she had never sat underneath it. The spot was off limits to staff.

*But tonight I'm a guest, so it should be okay, right?*

After deliberating for a long time, she finally sat cautiously down on the edge of the bench. After some time passed, she worked up the courage to take off her shoes.

Leaning against the bench's armrest, she pulled her legs towards her and put her arms around her knees. When her feet touched the cool marble of the bench, the aching subsided somewhat. The shoes were beautiful to the eye, but they hurt her feet immensely, so much so that she shuddered to think of putting them back on.

*If only I hadn't run in them, my heels would have been all right.*

As she gingerly touched the most painful spots on her feet, a memory flashed into her mind.

She grimaced as she thought of Duke Herhardt staring at her as he kissed his fiancée. She was equally perplexed by the fact that Claudine had wanted the kiss in the first place, when she had clearly been aware that there was a third person on the terrace.

“Why did they do that?” she muttered, and unwittingly started

rubbing her lips. “Ew…” She rubbed the inside of her lips with the back of her hand. Seeing the duke on the terrace had brought back memories from the traumatic encounter she had had with him on that moonlit night at his cabin. She kept rubbing and rubbing her lips, trying to rid herself of the memories.

# Chapter 20:
## Cry, or Better Yet, Beg

“You're so kind, Ma'am,” Mrs. Ettman said as she looked admiringly at Dowager Herhardt. “How can you be so generous?”

As her face grew even more joyful, her son Kyle looked more and more troubled standing next to her.

Matthias observed the mother and son with interest. He was well aware that his grandmother, who loved the family doctor, also adored the doctor's son. Dr. Ettman was a highly competent physician with an amiable personality, so it was easy to see why she liked him so much.

If nothing out of the ordinary happened, perhaps Kyle Ettman, who resembled his father, would follow in his father's footsteps. Matthias's grandmother seemed certain of this, and Matthias agreed.

But that was it. There was no need for him to pay any further attention to such straightforward, boring facts, although he wasn't so sure about the lady of the Ettman household, the ambitious Linda Ettman, who seemed quite different from her husband and son.

“Do you think it would be all right for us to greet them now?” Mrs. Ettman asked, forgetting her manners momentarily out of worry that Dowager Herhardt would change her mind.

“Please, dear,” Dr. Ettman said, gently trying to dissuade his wife.

However, Mrs. Ettman showed no signs of backing down.

Matthias shifted his gaze back to Kyle.

Matthias's grandmother had just offered to introduce the Ettmans to Baron Arndt's family, saying that she was sure the two families would get along well. Everyone understood what she meant by this. Baron Arndt had a daughter who was Kyle's age. That is, he had a daughter of marrying age.

Although the Ettman family lacked an aristocratic title, they were far wealthier than the House of Arndt, and they were more

respected in social circles. Thus Baron Arndt stood to gain more if the two families were united by marriage.

"Sure, Mrs. Ettman, now would be an excellent time." Smiling generously, Dowager Katharina von Herhardt called a servant over.

After receiving orders to bring Baron Arndt and his wife, the servant quickly disappeared into the crowd. Kyle's face was now unmistakably anxious as he looked out towards the terrace by the garden. It was as if he had left something precious out there.

Noting this, Matthias grinned subtly. *A mother with endless affection and expectations for her son. A son who doesn't want to disappoint his mother. And Layla Llewellyn, standing between them.* He chuckled at the thought.

Just then, Baron and Baroness Arndt appeared, led by the servant. Naturally, their daughter was with them as well.

Matthias could tell that Kyle was aware of the significance of this encounter; apparently, he wasn't totally clueless. From his eyes it was clear that he longed to run outside at once, but he was a good boy and knew his manners.

*If that's the case, then it's obvious how the story of this dutiful son's puppy love will resolve,* Matthias thought. Leaving behind the tedious matchmaking encounter, he went outside, then cut across the terrace and down the stairs to the garden at a leisurely pace. *Yes, the story will resolve with Layla abandoned here by my woods.*

Just as he was reaching this conclusion, he found Layla. Since she was waiting for the boy, he knew she wouldn't have gone far.

Sure enough, she was sitting under the rose-covered pergola in the corner of the garden.

Slowing his pace, Matthias walked in her direction. He wondered why she wasn't reacting with shock at his presence like usual, until he realized that she was fast asleep. The faint moonlight shining through the roses illuminated the young lady where she sat in a scrunched-up position.

Matthias stopped a short distance from the bench, and took a long look at her. He observed her shoes placed neatly next to her,

her blistered feet, her slender arms wrapped around her knees, and her face, which looked even gentler than it did when she was awake.

Her long hair was draped over her slender neck and shoulders. Wondering what those wavy blonde locks would feel like to the touch, he stooped over and picked up her shoes.

It was at that moment that Layla's eyes slowly opened.

* * *

*I must be dreaming,* Layla drowsily thought.

Matthias was now leaning against one of the posts of the pergola, facing the bench. In one hand he held what appeared to be a pair of women's shoes.

*Even for a dream, that's pretty strange...* As this thought came to Layla's mind, the last traces of sleepiness faded away. Nonetheless, she couldn't believe what she was seeing. “Your Grace...?” she quietly whispered.

In place of a reply, Matthias took out a cigarette and lit it. The pale smoke flowing through his lips finally convinced Layla that she wasn't dreaming.

Feeling like she was going to faint from the surprise, she was about to stand up, when she realized that the shoes in his hand were her own. Unsure what to do, she curled up again on the edge of the bench. Looking down at her with amusement, Matthias dangled the shoes in front of her, saying, “Would you like these back?” Bluish smoke drifted out of his mouth along with the quiet question.

“Yes, please.”

His next words were even harsher. “Then cry for me, Layla.”

She couldn't believe her ears. She remained at a loss for words for a moment. She hoped that Kyle would come to her rescue, but the path to the pergola was empty.

“He's not coming,” the duke calmly said. It was as if he had read her thoughts. “Kyle Ettman.” Noticing a look of doubt on Layla's

face, he whispered, “The boy you're waiting for.” He tossed his half-smoked cigarette to the ground. A thin wisp of smoke rose from it then gradually stopped.

Layla looked up at him angrily. “No.” Forgetting her shyness about him seeing her wounded feet, she boldly stood up and stood before him. She was still frightened of him, but she didn't want to be an object of amusement for him anymore. “Kyle always keeps his word.”

“Does he?”

“Yes,” she firmly replied.

“You seem pretty certain of that.”

Mustering all her courage, she replied, “I know what kind of person Kyle is much better than you do, Your Grace.”

As he looked at her, a derisive grin spread over his face. “You shouldn't be so reckless with the things you hold certain, Layla.” He took a step towards her.

She flinched, but didn't back down. “I... I really don't understand.”

“What don't you understand?” he asked.

“Why do you hate me so much, Your Grace?” Her voice was trembling, but her eyes were clear.

“Hating you makes me feel good,” he calmly replied with a wry smile on his face. “It's fun to see you cry, and I enjoy hearing you beg.”

“How can you say that?”

“I was just answering your question, Layla.” He was unfazed by her shocked expression.

She felt like she was about to start sobbing from the humiliation, but she managed to hold back her tears. “You don't act this way towards anyone other than me,” she said.

Matthias readily nodded. “That's true.”

“But why-”

“Because it's you.”

“Pardon?”

“Because you're Layla. You're nothing,” he flatly replied.

This made her feel even more miserable. “I'm sorry, Your Grace.” She struggled not to cry as she looked at him. She started to miss all the relatives who had briefly housed her before sending her away. Even her alcoholic uncle had never acted this cruelly towards her. “I'm truly sorry for having the audacity to stay on your estate when I'm nothing.” Not only was her voice trembling, but her tightly-clenched fists now were as well. “If you despised me so, why didn't you just refuse to let me stay here in the first place?”

“That would have been too coldhearted, Layla.”

“But you're being so coldhearted now,” she replied. No matter how much she tried to hide it, it was clear from her voice that she was on the brink of sobbing. “Are you going to banish me from your estate now?”

“No.” His eyes grew darker as he looked at her. “Don't worry about that. You're fulfilling your role just fine.”

“But you said that I was nothing.”

“That's your role.” He slowly closed and opened his eyes, and the last trace of a derisive smile left his lips, leaving his face utterly cold and emotionless. “And you can stop with the apologies.” He stood up straight. “And Kyle Ettman, the boy you're waiting for? He's not going to come.” As he pointed over Layla's shoulder at the empty path, his hand brushed against her hair.

Startled, she took a step back, but the bench was in her way and prevented her from moving any farther than that.

“So Layla...” he said, caressing her blonde hair for a moment before looking even deeper into her eyes. “Cry.” He remained calm even as he was giving this harsh command. Grinning slightly, he added, “Or better yet, beg.”

*He's crazy,* she thought. She had suspected as much for a long time, but now she was certain. *He's completely out of his mind.*

* * *

Matthias returned to the mansion and found Kyle Ettman still

standing next to Mrs. Ettman. The Arndts seemed very interested in marrying off their daughter to the Ettman family, and Mrs. Ettman seemed just as enthusiastic. Kyle, on the other hand, was visibly uncomfortable, but his mother didn't seem to care about how he felt.

Matthias became interested again in this tedious matchmaking encounter. Among the familiar faces at the party, he resumed his role as Duke Herhardt, lord of Arvis.

Layla had cried. Thinking back on that moment, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction. Unable to contain her indignation, her whole body had started trembling, and then thick tears had streamed down her face. Her usually clear eyes had appeared even clearer in that moment. Moistened by the tears, they had resembled the emeralds on the necklace she was wearing. This had pleased Matthias.

Once she cried for him like this, he had gladly returned her shoes. On his way out of the garden, he had looked back and seen her standing in the same place, still crying. He had begun walking with lighter steps at the thought that, since he was the reason she was crying, her tears were his.

Those tears had washed away the displeasure he had felt went he had first seen Kyle Ettman escorting her into the mansion. They had also washed away the strange, indescribable feeling that had come over him when he had kissed Claudine while looking at Layla.

That night, among all his possessions, Layla was the most beautiful to him, and the beautiful Layla had cried because of him.

For this reason, it was a perfect summer night.

Just as he was reaching this satisfying conclusion, Layla suddenly appeared again. She was standing on the walkway between the terrace and the hall, looking for someone.

“Kyle Ettman,” Matthias whispered to himself.

Layla seemed to have spotted Kyle. But she wasn't approaching him. She seemed to have figured out the significance of the people gathered around him, in particular Baron Arndt's daughter.

Layla remained hidden behind a column for a long while, then walked up to a passing servant and said something to him. The servant nodded and started walking towards Kyle, who now looked to be reaching the end of his patience. Meanwhile, Layla left the terrace.

Matthias impulsively approached the servant and said, “Summon Count Klein for me.”

The servant's eyes widened at this command. He glanced uncertainly in Kyle's direction, but soon responded as Matthias knew he would: “Yes, Your Grace.” He then turned around and hurriedly walked into the crowd to fulfill the order he had been given.

Matthias went out onto the terrace and leaned against the column where Layla had just been. Layla was already far away, walking along the path that went through the garden. Her feet seemed to hurt a lot, because she was limping, and soon she removed her shoes and started walking barefoot.

Matthias watched her as he waited for the servant to return. He knew that the servant would fail to find Count Klein. The count had greeted him earlier in the evening, before leaving early due to a migraine.

Just as the distant Layla was vanishing into the woods, the servant reappeared, saying, “I'm sorry, Your Grace. Count Klein has already gone home.”

“I see.” Matthias nodded and smiled. “Good work, anyway.” He sauntered back inside.

Only then was the servant able to resume his earlier task. He went to Kyle and said something to him.

As Kyle listened, a look of dismay spread across his face. He finally asked to be excused and rushed out to the terrace. This didn't bother Matthias. He knew that Layla was quite a fast walker, despite her size. Kyle would never be able to catch up with her.

Matthias gladly accepted a glass of champagne that Riette offered him.

It was a perfect party on a beautiful summer night.

# Chapter 21:
## Time To Become an Adult

Bill let out a worried sigh. “I don't know if I should leave you here.”

“Stop stalling, Uncle or you're going to miss the train!” Layla gently chided.

Bill was reassured by her confidence, but he still felt wistful.

The previous afternoon, an obituary notice had been delivered to the cottage. Bill's older brother had passed away. The brothers hadn't been very close and they hadn't seen each other in a long time, but Bill couldn't ignore the significance of his last immediate family member dying.

Ultimately, he decided to take a few days off from work and pay a visit to his hometown. He wasn't particularly concerned about taking time off work or traveling, but he was pained by the thought of leaving Layla, who he still saw as a little girl, all alone.

“Make sure to keep the door locked,” he told her, “and keep the windows closed and locked, even if it's hot.” He had told her these same things countless times since the previous night. “My hunting rifle is hanging in my room, so-”

“I'll make sure the door and windows are locked, and I'll bring the hunting rifle into my room and keep it by my bed. If a bad guy shows up, I'll shoot him,” Layla said, calmly reciting the words she had heard so many times she knew them by heart. “I'll eat well, sleep well, and have a good time.”

Bill was going to be gone three days at most, but he was fretting over Layla as if he were leaving on a months-long voyage. Finally, he reluctantly left the cottage, despite his worry, and Layla followed him to the mansion's gate to see him off.

Glancing back at the majestic mansion, Bill cautiously asked, “Layla, did something happen that night at the party?”

“No, nothing happened. I had fun. Truly.”

“I'm glad to hear that... but it seems like you and Kyle have been spending less time together since then.”

She chuckled as if she found his question silly. “Me and Kyle? No way. We've just both been busy lately.”

“I can trust you on that?”

“Yes. Why would I lie about something like that?”

“Well, sometimes things get awkward between people. Anyway, Layla, if you get afraid of being alone, why don't you ask Kyle to... no, never mind. Forget I said that,” Bill said, shaking his head with a serious look on his face. “That guy is the most dangerous of all.”

“Ugh, Uncle...!”

“If he comes over to hang out, make sure he leaves before sundown. Got it?”

“Stop saying strange things and be on your way, Uncle,” she said, tenderly patting him on the back now that they had arrived at the mansion's gate.

Bill looked back and repeated his advice several times before finally crossing Platanus Road and continuing on his way. Layla kept watching until he was out of sight, smiling and waving at him each time he looked back.

*It's going to be a long three days,* she thought.

* * *

“Layla is avoiding me,” Kyle said. He was sure of it now. “I bet it's because of that party.” It hadn't been hard for him to come to this conclusion. “Don't you think so, Phoebe?”

In response to Kyle's solemn question, Phoebe simply remained perched on the windowsill, pecking at the oats Kyle had provided for her. Kyle sighed when he realized that he was trying to have a serious discussion with a pigeon.

Phoebe had brought more disappointing news from Layla today. Uncle Bill would be traveling to his hometown for a few days, during which time Layla would be spending her days at the library, leaving the cottage empty.

Layla had been sending similar notes for several days now, saying that she would be at a friend's house, or at an appointment downtown, or busy working in the orchard. At first, he had appreciated that she was being considerate enough to save him needless trips to the cottage when she wasn't there. But now it was starting to feel like she was just making up lame excuses to avoid him.

“I don't blame her. I'd probably act the same if I were in her position,” he said, clutching his hair and sighing.

He had proudly told her that he was her companion and that he would look after her for the whole party, but then had abandoned her. Once the servant had relayed her message to him that she would be leaving early, he had rushed around looking for her, but she had already gone home.

*Why couldn't I have left the hall a little sooner? I told her to wait for me. I promised her that I would be back soon. But I didn't keep that promise.*

While Kyle fretfully paced around his room, Phoebe finished her meal and flew away. Kyle spent a moment staring out the window in the direction Phoebe had flown away, then impulsively exited his room.

Before he knew it, he was on his bicycle, pedaling at a frenzied pace. Barely noticing how much he was exerting himself, he thought only of Layla the whole way. Just as his thoughts started to seem like they were going to make his heart burst, he arrived at Bill's cottage. As he struggled to catch his breath, the scorching sunlight beat down on his rising and falling shoulders.

There were white sheets and a pillowcase hung on a clothesline in the yard, still dripping. Through the sheets, he could see the silhouette of a young woman's slender body.

Feeling both dejection and relief at once, he slowly brushed his sweaty hair away from his forehead. Only then sensing that someone was there, Layla peeked her head between the sheets. Her green eyes widened as she saw it was him. Her lips twitched a few

times before she finally said, “Kyle...”

The sound of her voice was sweet enough to make Kyle forget all about the awkward situation.

* * *

After sitting at the table in silence for a long while, Kyle finally remorsefully said, “I'm sorry.”

Sitting across from him, Layla, who had been looking down at her hands, looked up in surprise at him.

“I'm really sorry,” he repeated. “I messed up.”

“No, don't say that,” she replied, shaking her head. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry for lying to you.”

“You only lied because of me. It's all my fault.”

“No it's not, Kyle. I'm not mad or upset at you at all. Trust me.”

“Is there another reason, then? Something I don't know about that's making you avoid me?”

“You know, Kyle, you're my good friend. You're practically family. I like you like that. So... I think we need a little more space.” She tried to smile casually as she said this, but when she saw the look on his face, she realized he was not happy. She was telling the truth, she really wasn't angry or upset at him. But the night of the party, she had realized the great divide between the two of them.

Previously she had ignored this divide because they were friends. But the fact was, Kyle was from a prominent family that she could never fit in with. Even though she felt so close to him, she knew she needed to face the fact that he was the son of a renowned doctor, and could easily mingle with high-ranking nobles.

The Kyle that she had seen in the lavish banquet hall that night was clearly a person who belonged to that world. He was no longer the young boy who used to play with her.

*Why is it that children have to grow up and become adults?* She had mulled over this sad, simple question as she walked home barefoot along the forest path that night, high-heeled shoes in hand.

Ultimately she had come to the decision to accept the passage of time, and while time passed, to accept whatever path her friend needed to take.

After another long pause, Kyle said, “Don't you realize you're talking a bunch of nonsense?” He was speaking more quietly and calmly than usual.

“No. I really mean it,” she replied.

“If we like each other, why do we need more space?”

“It's the only way our friendship will be able to endure. I don't want to lose you, Kyle.”

“You think I want to lose you?” His eyes were trembling as he looked at her. “This is us we're talking about. Our friendship could never end, Layla.”

“Kyle...”

“I'll never lose you. I won't let there be a distance between us. How could you suggest that there should be?” He slammed his water glass down on the table and clenched his fists.

*You can't do that,* Layla wanted to say, but she couldn't bring herself to say it. Instead she just smiled, while thinking, *It's time to become an adult.* Holding back these harsh words, she stood up confidently and said, “Let's eat, Kyle.” Quickly putting on her apron, she added, “To make up for lying to you, I'm going to make you the most delicious lunch ever.”

* * *

“Matthias, can't you just get discharged from the military already and start focusing on your family affairs?” Riette set down the newspaper that he had been reading and lay down on the sofa. Yawning, he turned and looked at Matthias, who was sitting on an easy chair.

“A year or two in the imperial guard division won't be too bad,” Matthias replied as he flipped through the pages of a book. Even on this muggy summer afternoon, even while relaxing in his own bedroom, he was wearing a suit and tie.

“Sure, it's a Herhardt family tradition, after all,” Riette muttered as he lazily stretched his arms. “Matthias von Herhardt will be the most perfect Duke Herhardt in history,” he added with a chuckle.

Meanwhile, the canary, which had been quietly playing in its cage, suddenly flapped its wings and flew across the room, coming to rest perched atop the book Matthias was reading.

A smile crept across Matthias's face as he watched the bird chirping at him as if it was starting a conversation. It was an astonishing sight for Riette, who had seen Matthias shoot countless birds over the years without batting an eyelash.

“I hope that bird is female, Matthias,” Riette said, shaking his head and laughing. “Otherwise, this is gross.”

Without saying anything in response, Matthias extended his hand towards the bird. The little bird nuzzled its beak against the tip of his finger.

“Don't you think so, Claudine?” Riette asked, turning from Matthias to Claudine, who was sitting on the sofa across from them, working on an embroidery pattern.

Grasping the embroidery hoop tightly, she looked at Matthias and his bird. She then made eye contact with Riette, and her expressionless face gave way to a slight smile. “I don't know, I've heard that the birds with the most beautiful songs are male...”

“Ugh. Please, Claudine, let's just believe it's female.” Riette jokingly shuddered. “It creeps me out to think I'm watching two males interact like that.”

“Don't be so intolerant, Riette. Anyway, it's just a bird.” Giggling, Claudine lifted her embroidery needle again.

Matthias waited to turn the page until the bird hopped off the book. He seemed wholly unbothered even as it bounced playfully from his hand, to his shoulder, to his hair.

“You should wear a yellow dress to the engagement party, Claudine,” Riette said. “Maybe Duke Herhardt will like you as much as the bird if you do.”

“Never,” Claudine immediately replied. “I hate yellow.” She took

a deep breath and resumed her embroidery again. “It's a tacky color,” she added with a snicker.

A peculiar smile also appeared on the face of Riette, who was feigning innocence. After that, he stopped talking about the bird and began prattling on again about Matthias's military service and the upcoming engagement ceremony. “Our little lady Claudine is going to outdo the imperial princess herself.”

“Your overpraise is making me blush, Riette,” Claudine replied, smiling brightly with a wrinkled brow.

It was an open secret that the emperor of Berg desired Duke Herhardt as his son-in-law. The emperor had a special place in his heart for his youngest daughter. Furthermore, the princess was so beautiful that she was called “the flower of society.”

Thus Claudine, whose status as the future Duchess of Arvis had been assumed since she was a child, had always felt somewhat threatened by the imperial princess. But in the end it was Claudine who had won out. Of course, she hadn't won because of love.

*“There's no need…”* that brief phrase summed up the reason why the Herhardts had not felt necessary to pursue a marriage between Matthias and the imperial princess. The Herhardt family had a longer history than that of the imperial family, not to mention more wealth and honor. In their judgment, whatever benefits would come from having the imperial princess as the next duchess weren't worth the trouble. This seemingly arrogant attitude was understandable given the Herhardt household's considerable reputation.

Thus Claudine Brandt was considered a more desirable lady than the emperor's daughter. It was clear why the Herhardt family had chosen her. She was the only child of a prestigious count who lacked a successor. From the Herhardts' perspective, she offered a similarly impressive pedigree and similarly large dowry to that of the imperial princess, without demanding the onerous reverence that marrying a member of the imperial family entailed.

Regardless of these details, however, the important thing to Claudine was that on the day of the engagement ceremony, her

name would be placed higher than that of the imperial princess. This thought filled her with so much joy that she felt like she could love everything in the world, including that silly little bird.

“I can't believe the engagement ceremony is coming up so soon. It feels strange,” Riette said as he sat up and stretched his arms.

Claudine gazed at him for a moment before casually returning to her embroidery.

# Chapter 22:
## Into the Light

Matthias's decision to turn around was an impulsive one. He had planned to stay in his cabin until dinnertime to catch up on work. At least, this had been his plan until he stepped out of the mansion. All of a sudden, however, he looked around and realized that he was standing on the road leading to the gardener's cottage. He paused for a moment but didn't turn back.

Everything had proceeded in an orderly manner for the previous several days. It had to. The irritation he was feeling would be resolved by her tears.

Lengthening his stride, he started down the shady forest path. He loosened his tie and undid the top button on his tight-fitting shirt. His movements were rougher and more impetuous than usual. His emotions had been getting increasingly difficult to manage, and he was sick of it. He wanted everything in his world to be in its place. His emotions were no exception. This was the reason he had never allowed himself to obsess over women.

As far as he was concerned, sexual desire was nothing more than a base instinct. He had never been swayed by it enough to form an attachment. Rather, he thought it was best to satisfy it and be done with it, to prevent it from becoming too much of a burden. Such desires had never occupied his mind much in the first place.

This made him feel all the more displeasure at the emotions he was feeling about Layla. She was all he saw in the world. All his senses were focused on her. He could feel an uncontrollable passion building up from deep inside himself. Sometimes he was unable to stop his lustful thoughts about her.

He became distraught the moment that he realized he was in the grip of these feelings. They weren't even worthy of going on his list of priorities. Layla Llewellyn wasn't either. This seemed obvious to him. Still, he wanted to make sure.

The shade over the forest path lessened as he drew nearer to the cottage. Soon he could see the blinding light of the summer sun beyond the edge of the forest. Without hesitation, he walked into the light.

* * *

On her way back from sending Kyle off, Layla heard a tiny chirping sound. Following the sound, she found a helpless baby bird that had fallen from a tree in her backyard. The feeble little creature's feathers had just started to come in.

“Oh no, did you fall?”

Carefully lifting the bird and cradling it in her hands, she looked up at the tree. Sure enough, there was a nest visible on one of the high branches. Luckily, despite the great height from which it had fallen, the baby bird wasn't noticeably injured.

“It's okay, I'll take you home.”

She petted the bird to calm it down, then carefully placed it in the pocket of her apron and rushed to Bill's shed to get a ladder.

She set the ladder securely against the tree and nimbly climbed up it. The nest was slightly higher than the ladder could reach, so after reaching the top of the ladder she had to climb up a few branches of the tree itself. Normally this would have been an easy task for her, but to protect the baby bird in her apron she had to move with extra caution.

Once she was close enough to the nest, holding herself up with her arm wrapped tightly around a branch, she used her other arm to reach into her apron pocket. She retrieved the baby bird and, stretching her arm as far as it would go, was just barely able to place the bird back in its nest. Before she was even able to breathe a sigh of relief, however, her arm started to slip from the branch.

As she lost her balance, the world started to spin. Luckily she was just barely able to maintain her grip on the branch, but only after accidentally knocking the ladder down with her foot. If this weren't bad enough, the branch she was holding onto for dear life started to

creak under her weight. She could tell it was only a matter of time before it would snap.

“Uncle! Uncle Bill!” she instinctively shouted. Only after desperately calling for Bill a few more times did she remember that he wasn't home. “Kyle!” she then tearfully shouted. She knew Kyle was already far away, but she didn't know what else to do. If Uncle Bill couldn't help her, her only hope was Kyle.

Just then, she heard something unexpected.

“Layla...”

A gentle voice was calling her name with a lilting tone. Her mind went blank with fear, but soon she realized whose voice it was. She lowered her frightened gaze and immediately saw him. Duke Herhardt was standing under the tree, peering up at her moment of crisis as if he were sightseeing.

He glanced around, observing the fallen ladder and the half-broken branch before slowly turning his gaze back to the perilously hanging Layla.

“Shall I save you?” he asked. Unbelievably, he was smiling.

*Of all people, why does it have to be that crazy guy?* “No!” she shouted, flatly refusing his offer of help even though she knew she might fall any second. She knew it was a long shot, but she tried to swing herself over towards the trunk of the tree, hoping that she could wrap her arms and legs around it. All this accomplished, however, was to cause the branch to crack even more. Terrified, she screamed, “Kyle! Kyle!”

Looking at the road by which Kyle had left, Matthias chuckled. “He's not coming,” he said, casually crossing his arms.

*I know he's cruel and uncaring, but how can he look at someone in danger and not seem the least bit concerned?* She soon realized that she shouldn't have expected normal human compassion from the deranged duke. “Go away!” she shouted at him resentfully. “If you're not going to help me, go away! Why are you just standing there?!”

“It looks like you're about to fall, so I'm going to call for someone

to save you," he said.

"What?"

"I'm not such a coldhearted person, you see." He looked at her with a lazy grin. "I'll call for the young Master Ettman, since you were calling for him so desperately."

*Seriously?* Layla was now gasping for air and couldn't muster a response.

"Although, considering his short stature, maybe I'd better call Dr. Ettman instead."

*Ugh.* She had the urge to shout insults at the duke, but her social position didn't allow this. Just as she was thinking that she would rather fall than beg him for help, her fear got the better of her and she found herself shouting, "S-save me!"

"Are you sure?" he asked, unfolding his arms and calmly removing his jacket. "Call for me, then."

"What?"

"Call for me." He took a few steps towards the tree, then stopped again and looked up at her. He seemed unwilling to lift a finger to save her from falling unless she met his demand.

Layla knew full well that he was capable of such heartless inaction. "Please, Your Grace!" she shouted. Her distressed cry was tinged with indignation. "Your Grace!" As the moment of her fall crept closer, her cries grew more desperate. She continued to call out to him, until finally the branch snapped.

Her mind went blank as she fell. And then he stepped forward.

In contrast to the casualness with which he had been watching, the moment she started falling, he swiftly ran to just the right spot, where he was able to catch her. The force of the impact knocked him to the ground, but even then he held onto her tightly.

The cloud of dust that arose from their fall gradually settled, just as Layla's spinning mind gradually came back to a state of awareness.

The first thing that occurred to her was how, considering how far she had fallen, she actually felt remarkably comfortable. It took her

another moment to realize that this was because she was in Matthias's calm embrace. Yes, Duke Herhardt was lying beneath her, and his body had broken her fall, saving her from injury.

Her chest was pressed against his, and she could feel his heart beating. His arms were still firmly wrapped around her back and the back of her head. As she furtively lifted her head, she detected a faintly minty smell coming off the smooth skin of his neck. She felt her cheeks growing warm. Soon her whole body felt hot.

She started struggling to try to free herself, but the more she struggled, the tighter he held her. She could feel that he was too big and strong. This filled her with embarrassment and other, unfamiliar feelings, which led her to struggle even more wildly.

"Hold still," he quietly ordered in a breathy voice.

But her resistance only grew stronger. *No,* she thought, shuddering. *That's ridiculous. I don't want to hold still.* She tried to scream but no sound came out.

Meanwhile, Matthias's body was growing warmer as well. He gripped her back and head even more tightly. All these sensations were strange and unfamiliar to her, and she couldn't stand it.

Flooded with visceral fear, she tried her hardest to get free. But the more she tried, the more helpless she felt. No matter what she did, she couldn't push him away. Just as her fear was reaching its height, she saw his ear in front of her. Without thinking, she bit it.

"Augh!" Groaning in pain, he pushed her off of him. He then looked over at her, and was perplexed to see that she was trembling even though she was the one who had just attacked him. With the same cheeky look in his eyes, he soon started laughing. "I told you, you need to act like a lady, Layla." Suddenly his hand that had been rubbing his ear reached out and grabbed her by the hair.

Before she knew what was happening, she was lying face up on the ground. All she could see was his face staring down at her.

"Is this the thanks I get for saving you? Don't you think biting is a bit unladylike?"

"If you're not going to act like a gentleman, why should I act like

a lady, Your Grace?" She turned her blushing face aside as she tried to push him away again.

But he soon grabbed her chin and made her face him again. His hand felt very hot. "Didn't you call me the greatest gentleman in all of Karlsbar?" he asked.

"No! I was mistaken!"

"Really?"

"If you're a g-gentleman... how can you d-do such... awful th-things…?" she stammered as she tried to push away from him. She felt like she was about to burst into tears.

Matthias's eyes darkened when he noticed that she was furiously rubbing her lips, as though there was something dirty on them that she was trying to get off.

"Please step aside," she said, glaring at him. "I don't know why you're... ack!" Before she could finish speaking, she let out a shriek.

Matthias had leaned forward and bitten her ear. It happened in a flash.

Taking her tiny hands that were trying to hit and claw at him and pressing them to the ground, he was now holding her ear in his mouth. When he began to lick her earlobe, she started to pant and scream.

Having originally simply intended to pay her back for biting his ear, he changed his mind and pushed her down forcefully. Sobbing and gasping for air, she writhed as he bit her earlobe even harder. He used his full body weight to pin down her flailing limbs as he left several bite marks on her reddened ears.

He smiled contentedly when he saw her disordered appearance. Her blank eyes were swollen with tears. The lips through which she was gasping for air were a darker shade than usual.

Grasping her fingers so tightly that he almost broke them, he pressed his lips against hers. Astounded at what was happening, she clenched her lips tightly together, but he easily made it past her resistance.

This sultry summer would soon be over. He knew this well

enough, but it didn't stop him.

He stuck his tongue into her mouth lustfully. Saliva began to flow from their mashed-together lips, along with the sound of gasps and moans.

# Chapter 23:
## Torn Out, Crushed, and Thrown Aside

The more Layla struggled, the more firmly Matthias held her down, but the more he did so, the more vehemently she struggled.

Mostly she kept her eyes tightly closed. But each time she briefly opened them, she saw something different: leaves swaying in front of the sky, then Matthias, then the shadows of the leaves quivering on the ground, then Matthias again.

The hazy dust rising from the ground surrounded their intertwined bodies. Matthias's wild, ferocious kissing seemed closer to violence than lust.

After a certain point, Layla lost consciousness of what was even happening. All she was aware of was an extreme fear of not being able to breathe. Meanwhile, Matthias continued to suck on her lips and curl his tongue around hers with greater and greater intensity. She felt like she was an animal that had been caught by a predator and was being eaten alive.

As she continued to gasp and sob, she snapped back to full awareness the moment his lips touched her neck. Her collarbone became exposed as he tore off the top buttons of her blouse.

While his lips focused on a spot where he could feel her heart beating, his hands moved up from her thighs and waist to her breasts.

“Ah...!” she shouted. Shaking her head so vigorously that she was getting dizzy, she grabbed at his shirt. A few of his buttons fell to the ground. Her fingernails left several bright-red scratch marks on his neck. Meanwhile, his lips had left a red mark on the skin above her collarbone.

As his lips started to descend lower than her collarbone, she cried out even louder. She was unable to process what was happening. All she was experiencing was a desperate sense of fear as she felt his body heat, his busy hands, and various other strange, shameful

sensations.

Fortunately, he went no further than that. Propping himself up with one arm, he looked down at her. She opened her eyes.

He was still breathing heavily, but there was no longer a crazed, lustful look in his eyes. Instead, his eyes looked serene. It was the same look he had had in his eyes the day he stepped on the coin she had dropped. It was also the way he always looked after calmly shooting a bird.

The feeling of humiliation this look gave her made her blush even more. After staring at her for a moment, he slowly closed his eyes, then opened them even more slowly. His Adam's apple stopped fidgeting as his breathing subsided.

A breeze blew from the forest, causing her already messy hair to flutter about. Gazing at those golden waves, he brushed the dirt off his hands and moved his body off hers, sitting on the ground next to her. He took in the sights around him: a woman lying in the shade of a tree, sniffling; well-dried laundry flapping on a clothesline in a yard; an old cottage; himself in the midst of this strange scene, sitting with his clothes and hair all disheveled.

Chuckling quietly to himself, he swept his hair off his forehead. Layla was now curled up in a ball, trying to catch her breath. As he watched her trembling on the ground, covered with dirt, his laughter grew more intense.

*You.*

He stopped laughing and let out a deep sigh, while slowly rubbing the saliva and blood off his lips with the back of his hand.

*You're nothing, and yet I...*

When he looked back at Layla, she had crawled to the foot of the tree. She was holding a branch tightly with both of her quivering hands, glaring at him. Tears were still flowing out of her fierce eyes.

Turning away from the woman pathetically threatening him, Matthias slowly stood up. He looked quietly down at his hands, which had just been clutching at the dirt.

*You don't even realize, do you? You have no idea that I wanted to*

*wring your little neck with these hands.*

He picked up his jacket, and with neither hesitation nor hurry he turned and left.

Summers in Berg were short. The cold winds would soon begin to blow, and autumn would arrive in no time. Matthias knew this all too well.

* * *

Layla was only able to stand up once Duke Herhardt was no longer in sight.

She picked up her glasses and put them on, then started limping towards the cottage. Her steps were so unsteady that she had to stop and rest several times to stop from stumbling over.

*I wish I had just fallen to the ground.*

Deep regrets flowed inside her along with the thick tears streaming down her cheeks. No matter how many times she tried to wipe her lips with her hand, and then with her apron, she couldn't get rid of the horrible taste and feelings that lingered there.

She made it to the spigot, and used all her strength to work the pump. The cold water streamed out with such great pressure that it splashed out of the pail and got her clothes wet, but she didn't care.

“No...” she muttered, unsure of what she was denying. “No. No. No.” As she shook her head and repeated that word between irregular breaths, the pail became filled to the brim.

Clasping her hands together to stop their shaking, she suddenly felt like she was being followed. She looked around, but everything looked the same as normal. She saw Uncle Bill's cottage, the coziest place in the world, which she loved with all her heart.

The breeze was flowing through the trees and the birds were singing. Sunset was approaching, and the peaceful forest was bathed in beautiful, golden sunlight. But her heart was still racing anxiously. Just as she had no clear sense of what she had been muttering “no” to, she was unable to discern what exactly she was fearing. All that she knew for sure was that something deep inside

was telling her she needed to escape.

Removing her glasses, she splashed the water from the pail against her face several times. She wiped her neck, which was covered with red marks. She washed her ears. But the feelings that he had left her with remained.

She stared blankly up at the sky for a moment, then, gritting her teeth, she lifted the pail and poured it over her head. Her whole body shivered as the cold water flowed down from her head to her feet.

As memories of her desperate struggle to survive continued to flash through her mind, she lifted the pail with shaking hands and filled it up again, then used both hands to scoop water into her mouth and rinse it out.

She spitted out the water, hoping that the memories would leave her as well. But it was no use. Those strange, disturbing images kept returning. She kept rinsing and spitting, rinsing and spitting, until she accidentally inhaled some of the water, which sent her into a fit of choked coughing. The coughing gave way to sobbing. Then she returned to the spigot to pump more water.

* * *

Matthias strolled around the garden for a while before stopping at the spot where the rose bed was interrupted by the marble staircase leading up to the mansion.

He had tried to brush all the dirt off his clothes, but there were still traces here and there. Of course, this didn't bother him. The greater problem lay in his memories, which had grown more vivid with each step he took away from her.

As soon as Layla was lying in his arms, his rational judgment had disappeared, and was replaced by an ardent desire to have her for himself. It was like he had turned into a wild beast.

He bit his lip and swept his hair off his forehead. He wanted to see what could make this ardent desire stop. It would have all been meaningless, vain, and ultimately insignificant. If only the

amazingly ignorant Layla hadn't cried, that is. If he had been able to tolerate his own poor treatment of her, perhaps.

He looked up, and saw the mansion amid the golden light of the afternoon sun. He slowly turned around. Beyond the garden, the forest looked empty and dreary a sort of non-place that held nothing of value.

He slowly closed his eyes as if to rid himself of this ridiculous, trivial desire for a beautiful woman. Opening his eyes again, he grabbed a handful of blossoming roses by their heads and tore them out of the ground.

The crushed flowers gave off a strong, fresh scent that reminded him of her body odor. Having torn them out of the ground and crushed them, he threw them aside. As he repeated this action, more and more crushed rose petals were scattered around his feet. Along with the petals came memories of that girl in this garden.

Each time he returned to Arvis, that girl had grown up a little more. The place where she resided was always full of roses in full bloom. He quietly lowered his eyes. In his mind, he envisioned the girl gradually growing into a woman as the seasons passed by. But in the end, it had all been for nothing.

Wiping his rose-scented hand against his lips, he strode across the ground where the petals had fallen. As dusk approached, a cool breeze started to blow. It was a breeze heralding the end of summer. He ascended the steps and entered the brightly-lit the mansion, not looking back once.

* * *

The sun had set, leaving a deep-purple hue in its wake in the western sky.

Darkness was spreading through Kyle's room, but he didn't turn on the lamp. Sitting low in a chair by the window, he watched the ever-changing sky.

He had been sitting in this same spot ever since returning from the cottage at Arvis. When he wasn't playfully grinning, his brown

eyes made his face look cold.

He and Layla had eaten a casual lunch together. She was clearly trying to behave like everything was normal, so he had tried as well. But inside he knew that things between them weren't the same anymore, and he knew that if he couldn't find a solution for this, he would lose her. He put his face in his palms.

She had told him that she wanted to be good friends with him for a long time. And that for this to work, there would need to be more space between them. He now understood what she had meant by this. But he didn't agree. He wanted to spend a long time together with her, but not simply as a good friend. Thus, he couldn't delay things any further.

As soon as he reached this conclusion, he boldly rose from his seat. He didn't want to ruin these happy days with Layla, so it was time that he reveal his hidden feelings for her.

After taking a deep breath, he opened the door of his room and walked down the hallway. There was a faint light coming from under the door to his father's study. Standing in front of the door, Kyle adjusted his clothes and took another deep breath.

He knew the significance of his mother's insistence on introducing him to all those daughters from aristocratic families at the duke's party. Previously, he couldn't understand why she was already thinking about marriage for him, but today he was grateful that she was.

*“I'll never lose you. I won't let there be a distance between us. How could you suggest that there should be?”*

Thinking back on these words he had said to Layla, he firmly knocked on the door. “Father, it's me.”

“Come on in, Kyle.” His father's voice sounded as warm and kind as ever.

Feeling encouraged by the tone of his father's voice, Kyle slowly opened the door to the study. Seated at his desk, Dr. Ettman greeted his son with a smile. Rather than slumping down in the chair facing the desk as he usually did, Kyle remained standing upright. “I have

something to tell you, Father."

"Judging by the fact that you're standing, am I right to assume this is a serious matter?"

"Yes," Kyle replied. To summon more courage, he clenched his fists and reminded himself that he had always intended to tell his father about this eventually. He gulped.

As the current plan went, he would move to the capital to begin college. Meanwhile, Layla would remain in Karlsbar and become a teacher.

Despite having known of this eventuality for a long time, he had never fully accepted it. He didn't want to believe that the day would come when Layla Llewellyn and Kyle Ettman weren't together. He had thus thought of another possibility. *What if she and I both go to college together? While I study to become a doctor, she could study to become an ornithologist. We could live together for the rest of our lives. We could be friends, lovers, and family.*

"Mother seems to be thinking about marriage for me lately," he said.

Dr. Ettman chuckled jovially at this comment and replied, "Yes, I think she got a bit ahead of herself that night at the party. Don't pay her too much mind, Kyle. I understand how she feels, but in my opinion, there's no need to rush these things."

"No, Father," Kyle replied, looking straight in his father's eye. "I want to think about marriage."

"Marriage? You do?" Dr. Ettman asked, looking back at his son with surprise.

"Yes," Kyle replied, feeling more lighthearted now. "I want to marry Layla and go to college with her, Father."

# Chapter 24:
## Blue Candy

The four days Layla spent alone were very strange.

Even though she had laughed it off at first, she followed her uncle's advice and both locked all the windows and took his hunting rifle and kept it by her bed. Despite having taken these precautions before going to bed, she found herself unable to sleep soundly. Sometimes she would be startled awake at the sound of owls and other nocturnal birds. When she did sleep, she often had nightmares. Amid gruesome scenarios where she was being beaten or abandoned, the duke's face would often flash into her mind's eye. This would cause the dream to descend into a reenactment of their horrible kiss.

Eventually the sun would rise, leading to days that seemed to go on forever. She kept herself busy, never resting throughout her waking hours. She took care of the livestock, tended to the vegetable garden, and swept and dusted the already-pristine cottage. She laundered the curtains and bedclothes, and even tidied the shed. Strangely, she couldn't read books or study like she normally liked to. When she tried, she couldn't keep her focus on the words on the page.

The days alone were unbearably long. When she couldn't think of anything else to do, she would pace around until nightfall, which brought with it more nightmares. On the morning of the fourth day, she tied her apron tightly around her waist and started walking out to the backyard, then stopped in place as a sudden thought struck her.

It was strange. Bill had always spent most of each day away from the cottage, working, during which time Layla had passed the time alone doing chores and homework. Just because they lived together didn't mean that they did everything together. They just sat at the same table, talked about their days under the lamplight of the warm

cottage, and...

“This is the first time,” she muttered to herself at the sudden realization.

Since being sent out of Lovita to Berg, she had never spent a day without seeing Uncle Bill. He had always been nearby. Thanks to him, she had never spent a day alone. At the beginning and end of each day, Uncle Bill had always been there.

But now, she was alone.

It had taken her four days to realize this, but another realization soon followed. She realized just how lonely, sad, and scary her days wandering the world as a young girl alone had been.

After pondering over these things for a while, she kept walking to the backyard. As she fed the chickens and milked the goats, she couldn't help glancing across the yard repeatedly.

Her wish for Uncle Bill's return had turned into an ardent prayer. She felt that once he returned everything would be all right again. The sadness of having to become an adult, the traumatic memory of her first kiss, all these confusing and daunting thoughts would disappear once she was no longer alone.

* * *

“Kyle.”

Startled at the voice abruptly calling his name when he had thought he was alone in his room, Kyle turned around.

His father had entered the room and was standing right behind his chair.

“Yes, Father?” Kyle replied, quickly rising from his seat.

On his desk lay a book that had been open to the same page for several days, ever since the evening when he had told his father of his intention to marry Layla.

“You're home early,” Kyle remarked, noting that it was still light outside.

Dr. Ettman smiled warmly at his son. “It's the weekend, Kyle”

“Huh? Already?”

“I won't ask you where your mind has been. I think I already know.” Chuckling to himself, he sat down in the chair from which Kyle had just stood. This was a sign that he had something to talk to Kyle about.

Feeling a little nervous, Kyle pulled up another chair and sat down facing his father.

That evening Dr. Ettman had made no response. He had simply stared at Kyle for a long while before telling him he would need a few days to think the matter over. From the look on his face and the tone of his voice, Kyle had known that it was no use trying to say anything more to him.

Thus he had waited for several days, conscious all the while of the infuriatingly slow-moving hands of the clock. For several days he had resisted his strong desire to go see Layla, since he didn't want to hurt her by making a promise he wasn't yet sure he could keep.

“I understand how you feel,” his Father said, “and I know how enamored you are of Layla. But Kyle, you're still too young to talk about marriage, as is Layla.”

“But didn't you and Mother get married the year you entered medical school?”

“Well, that was twenty-odd years ago...”

“And Lady Claudine, who's barely a year older than Layla, is getting engaged next week.”

“That's...”

“And Baron Arndt's daughter, who Mother introduced me to at the party, is the same age as Layla.” Kyle's face remained calm as he rattled off these examples one by one.

Dr. Ettman was soon brought to laughter. “You seem to be more serious about this than I thought.”

“I know I'm still young. And I understand your concerns, Father.”

“And yet you're persisting like this. Do you really care for Layla that much?”

“Yes,” Kyle replied without hesitation. His love for Layla was so

ardent, that he didn't have to think about his answer any more than he had to think about breathing.

“As for Layla going to college, well, I can certainly help out with that by sponsoring her.” Dr. Ettman looked at his son with a gaze that was at once stern and affectionate. “Layla is a good kid. She's good-natured and smart. If she wants to go to college, I'm willing to help.”

“Of course, I want Layla to be able to continue studying the things she's interested in. But Father, what I want most of all is to marry her.”

“A marriage is a matter of more than just two people.”

“Of course. I'm not discounting the importance of family conditions, honor, or prestige.”

“Then why are you being so obstinate?”

“Because no matter how important those things are, there's nothing more important than choosing the right person to spend one's whole life with.”

“Kyle...”

“I want to become a good doctor, a good husband, and a good father. Just like you, Father. For me, all of that starts with Layla.” His heart was starting to beat furiously, but he maintained his composure as he continued saying things that he had kept bottled up inside for so long. “I want to be a good person towards Layla, a good husband and a good father to her children.” He could feel his face starting to flush, but he kept speaking. “With Layla, becoming a good person in all these ways feels like the most natural thing in the world, but without her... without her, Father, they all sound ridiculous and meaningless.” With a clear, steady voice, he added, “Without her, I wouldn't have the self-confidence to live like that.” He clasped his hands together on his lap and looked in his father's eyes. “I know that you and Mother love me. Much of what you love about me is thanks to her. I think she's responsible for the best parts of me.”

Listening to his son's solemn speech, Dr. Ettman looked back at

him with an equally solemn gaze.

“I don't want to lose her,” Kyle said. His eyes were filled with determination. “Please help me keep her in my life, Father.”

* * *

The evening had come, but Bill still hadn't returned.

Having run out of chores with which to distract herself, Layla was sitting on a chair on the porch, staring blankly. Bill's empty chair felt especially large next to her.

*Could there have been an accident or something?* She bolted up at the thought. She remembered reading about a train accident in the newspaper once. And trains weren't the only risk, the carriages and automobiles also got into accidents frequently.

After pacing around the yard for a while, as the sun started to set she mustered the courage to walk towards the mansion's gate. For the past few days, she had been too afraid of running into the duke to venture down this path. With each step, she thought of Uncle Bill.

Ever since she was young, she had had a habit of assuming the worst. Since facing misfortune without preparation or defense could be fatal, she thought she could better face whatever misfortune might befall her if she thought about all possibilities beforehand and prepared for them.

As soon as any of her relatives started looking at her disapprovingly, she would start preparing herself for the inevitable consequences. If they hit her, she wouldn't cry. If they yelled at her, she wouldn't let it hurt her feelings. When they finally sent her away, she would take it in stride, and politely bid them farewell. On the way to the next home, she would try to smile even more brightly.

Her efforts had been successful, with each new home, she had been a little less affected by their abuse, and had smiled a little more brightly. Misfortunes had continued to follow her wherever she went, but thanks to her preparation, she had gotten much better

at enduring them. But if some misfortune had befallen Uncle Bill, she didn't think she could take it in stride.

Repeatedly muttering “Uncle Bill...” she soon passed through the gate. It wasn't in Bill's character to abandon her. He would surely return. But if he didn't return...

*Please return,* she thought. Putting her hands together like she was praying, she said, “Please, don't leave me all alone.”

Before his trip, she had reassured Bill and told him he had nothing to worry about. But now, after four days, she was the one who was worrying.

* * *

*“Where are you going, Mommy?”* the little Layla had asked after being given a pretty glass jar filled with hard candies. It was the first time she had ever seen such a thing in her life.

Looking just as pretty as the candies, her mother had gazed down at Layla for a long while before replying, *“Far away.”*

*“Are you coming home late, then?”* Layla had impatiently asked, eager to taste one of the candies.

*“Yes, honey.”*

*“How late?”*

*“Very late.”*

*“You'll come home before I eat all of these, though, right?”*

Seeing Layla shaking the jar of colorful candies, her mother had nodded and replied, *“Yes, I will.”*

*If you were going to abandon me, you shouldn't have answered that way,* Layla thought as she continued to walk down the road.

Her mother had been reputed to be too beautiful to be a poor man's wife. She fled, leaving her husband and daughter behind like they were pieces of clothing that didn't fit.

Various rumors spread about what became of her. Some said that she had become the mistress of a high-ranking nobleman. Others said that she had married a rich merchant and moved abroad. Whatever had truly become of her, she had cruelly left behind a

neglected young daughter, and a husband who was devastated by her abandonment. Having previously always been a kind, loving father, he started getting drunk every day. He no longer wanted to look at Layla, saying that he couldn't bear to look at a face that reminded him of the wife who abandoned him.

Layla ate the candies sparingly, awaiting her mother's return. Once the candies had dwindled enough for the bottom of the jar to be visible, she realized that her mother was never going to return. But she didn't want to accept that painful fact. So, she held off from eating the very last piece of candy.

She still had that last piece of candy the day that she was left all alone in the world. Her father, who had grown increasingly sick and debilitated by alcohol, finally passed away. That day, perhaps sensing that his end was near, he turned towards the daughter he had so long avoided and smiled. *"When the flowers are in bloom, let's go to the park, Layla,"* he said in a feeble voice.

That cheerful proposition turned out to be his last words, as he died that evening.

*If you're going to leave, you shouldn't make any promises.*

Unsure what to do with this inconvenient little girl, Layla's relatives at first stalled, each hoping another would step forward to take care of her. Meanwhile, she was left alone in an empty house, with nothing but an empty promise and a single piece of candy.

To this day, she still vividly remembered the shiny, blue piece of candy.

After a few days, when she had nothing else left to eat, she had finally put the piece of candy in her mouth. She bit down on it hard, breaking it into shards that scraped against the tender inside of her mouth.

Soon the salty taste of blood mingled with the sweet flavor of the candy, but she kept crunching away at it, sobbing all the while. It was a sweet and salty sadness. Looking out the window, she had seen that the flowers were blooming. Carried by the spring breeze, the pale-pink petals fluttered through the air like snowflakes.

* * *

Immersed in reminiscence as she walked down Platanus Road, Layla looked up and her eyes widened at once. “Uncle...! Uncle!” Her pale face was immediately suffused with a bright smile “Uncle! Uncle Bill!” She started running towards Bill, who was walking along the other side of the road.

Just then, the duke's black car turned onto Platanus Road.

# Chapter 25:
## The Color of My Sadness

By chance, Matthias caught a glimpse of Layla through the car window. She was running along the road, with a more joyful smile on her face than he had ever seen on her before. Her blonde hair fluttered in the wind.

He unconsciously gripped the armrest more tightly. He figured that she was running to greet the man walking towards her, who appeared to be Bill Remmer. He thought about telling the chauffeur to slow down, but then changed his mind.

Meanwhile Layla reached the gardener, and ran into his embrace in a way that reminded Matthias of his canary. The gardener hugged her tightly. Embraced by the gardener's burly arms, Layla looked like a little girl again. She had the brightest smile in the world on her face, and the gardener was laughing heartily. Just then, the car passed by them.

Matthias turned his gaze away from the window, and looked down at his hands, which had almost reached out to grab at the air. Looking at his hands, he could feel the sensations from that day still lingering in them. He almost thought he could still detect her body odor on them.

The engagement would soon be announced. Thinking of this, Matthias felt a strange sense of relief as the car passed through Arvis's gate.

* * *

Layla's wish had come true. Once Uncle Bill returned, everything was all right again.

Now that she was no longer alone, the sadness of having to become an adult, the traumatic memory of her first kiss, all those confusing and daunting thoughts had disappeared. Meanwhile, the breezes that blew at the beginning and the end of the day were

growing cooler, the days were growing shorter, and the atmosphere at Arvis was growing more festive than ever.

“Whew, don't get me started. I'm going to make just about every dish in the world,” Chef Mona said. During a brief break, she had come to chat with Bill on his porch. She sat down on the chair next to his and started grumbling. “With their engagement ceremony as lavish and grand as this, I'm scared to think what their wedding will be like.”

Just then, Layla returned from milking the goats. When she saw Mona, she smiled and waved.

“Just wait a little longer, Layla,” Mona said. “After tomorrow, I'm going to give you so much delicious food, you're going to get sick of it. I don't care how many guests they invite, I bet they won't be able to finish half the food we're preparing.” She laughed warmly.

Layla unconsciously reached for the collar of her blouse. The red marks the duke had left on her neck still hadn't fully disappeared after several days. Each time she saw them in the mirror, she shuddered with shame and embarrassment. “Is the engagement ceremony tomorrow already?” she asked.

“'Already'? Don't use that word, Layla. I can't wait for that stup... um, I mean, stupendous ceremony to be over.”

“Wow, so it's really tomorrow...” Layla whispered to herself. Smiling again, she said, “Well thanks for letting me know, Chef Mona. I look forward to trying all the food!” She smiled even wider, in an effort to rid herself of the nightmarish memories that kept flashing into her mind. Since the day of the incident, the duke hadn't come anywhere near the woods. She was happy about that. “I like chocolate cookies. And raspberry cake, too!” she exclaimed.

“Well we have mounds of both chocolate and raspberries, so I'll bring you plenty of both!” Mona replied.

“How can I repay you?”

“Repay me? Just eat a lot and keep growing.”

“Do you think I'll grow to be as big as Uncle Bill?”

“Oh, Layla. That might hinder your chances of finding a

husband," Mona replied, laughing, as she rose from her seat. Bill finally joined in the laughter as well, having only wiggled his eyebrows in amusement up to then.

After Mona left, it was a typical evening at the cottage. After eating dinner with Bill and tidying up the cottage, Layla opened up a textbook that she had been neglecting while he was gone. She intended to study a little and then go to bed, but then she dozed off at her desk and was awoken by the rising sun peeking through her window. It was the day of the duke's engagement ceremony.

Having left her glasses on her desk, she rubbed her bleary eyes and walked to the window. Opening it, she was met with a rush of cool air from outside.

As the sun continued to rise, the sky turned a bright, clear blue, which reminded her of that last piece of candy. As she was thinking this, another thought occurred to her, it was also the color of the duke's eyes.

* * *

Claudine selected a silk dress adorned with chiffon. Wearing the pale-pink dress, she looked elegant and beautiful enough to be the star of the evening's ceremony.

"You look so beautiful, Claudine!" Countess Brandt exclaimed as her daughter walked out of the dressing room. The maids standing nearby looked every bit as impressed.

Claudine reacted with an appropriately modest smile, although a look of pride and satisfaction remained visible in her eyes as she glanced in the mirror.

It was her idea to hold the engagement ceremony at Arvis. This was partly to show due respect for the Herhardt family, but more than this, it was because she wanted to make her mark as the future Duchess of Arvis.

"Marie, is she still not here?" she asked her maid.

Looking out the window, Marie replied, "She should be arriving right about... Ah, there she is! She's walking from the garden now,

Miss!”

Countess Brandt glanced out the window and frowned. Layla Llewellyn was walking up the steps leading from the rose garden to the mansion, carrying a basket full of flowers. “You summoned her again? Goodness, Claudine!”

“It's all right, Mother,” Claudine calmly replied. “I just needed some flowers to adorn my hair.”

“Why did you ask her specifically?”

“I figured I might as well,” Claudine replied, shrugging, before turning back towards the mirror. She was no longer smiling. “This way, I can receive both flowers and well wishes from an old friend at once.”

* * *

With all preparations complete for the engagement ceremony, there was a mood of festive excitement around the estate.

Layla entered the mansion through the staff door in the back. She wiped her feet thoroughly before entering, but still felt self-conscious walking on the floor inside, which glistened like a mirror.

Claudine had sent a maid to the cottage to summon her. When the maid asked her to pick some roses for Claudine's hair, Layla knew at once that flowers weren't the real reason she was being summoned.

Claudine was staying in a guest bedroom on the fourth floor of the mansion's east wing. As Layla walked down the hallway towards the room, she slowed her pace. Her knuckles were white from the weight of the basket of roses she was holding. Her heart was racing, and her lips were dry.

*No,* she argued to herself, *what happened that day after I fell from the tree was nothing more than an unfortunate accident. The duke himself probably thinks so too. Yes, I'm sure he does. So, it'll be all right.* She finally gathered her composure just as she was arriving at the door. She knocked, and the door opened on its own. Stepping inside, she curtsied politely as always and said, “Hello, Miss. I

brought the roses you requested."

"What do you think? Do I look all right?" Claudine asked, smiling as she walked towards Layla.

"Yes, Miss. You look beautiful," Layla replied. She was being sincere, Claudine looked as beautiful as a rose in full bloom.

"It's a relief to hear you say that," Claudine replied. "I was nervous. Do you think Duke Herhardt will find me beautiful as well?"

Layla felt a rush of anxiety at the mention of the duke. After a pause, she replied, "Yes. I'm sure he will." Her voice was shaking slightly. She felt like a child who had done something naughty. Even though the incident under the tree had been horrible and traumatic for her, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was now a shameless thief for what had happened between her and Claudine's fiancé. This feeling was eating away at all the self-esteem she had gained by serving Claudine over the years.

Claudine glanced at her maid, who then stepped forward to take the basket from Layla, handing her money in exchange. Instead of the usual single gold coin, this time it was a handful of them. This only made Layla feel worse.

"What are you doing?" the maid asked, frowning at Layla. "Aren't you going to say thank you?"

Closing her hand over the coins, Layla lowered her head. She had practiced this action so many times ever since she was young, it wasn't difficult to grin and bear it this time either. "Thank you, Miss," she said, smiling calmly at Claudine.

Claudine, who had been looking at Layla with an expressionless face, soon smiled back at her. "Not at all. I should be the one thanking you, Layla. Thanks to you, my engagement ceremony is going to be perfect." She turned around, thus indicating that the conversation was over.

Feeling relieved, Layla quickly left the room. She wanted to get out of the strange, uncomfortable world of the mansion as soon as possible, but she knew she had to be on her best behavior as long as

she was inside.

After adjusting her clothes and regripping the basket, she started walking at the fastest pace propriety allowed. However, when there was only a short distance left to the staff door, she crossed paths with the duke, who was walking up the stairs.

Standing behind him, the duke's butler Hessen smiled benevolently and said, “You must be coming back from doing an errand for Lady Claudine, Layla.”

Layla curtsied, then quickly stepped aside towards the wall of the hallway and lowered her head. She hoped that they would walk past her and go on their way, but the duke just stood in place, staring at her. She glanced up briefly, and when she saw that he was looking at her, she lowered her head even further down and started blushing. She had made eye contact. It was just for an instant, but now her heart was pounding. *He didn't seem concerned,* she thought. *He looked like he'd forgotten all about what happened between us.*

Just as she started to contemplate throwing politeness to the wind and making a run for it, the duke brushed past her and went on his way. Once the sound of his footsteps had faded away, she made her escape, running to the door and out of the mansion.

After that, she spent the day doing her usual chores. As evening approached, guests started to arrive at the mansion, but far away, deep in the duke's hunting grounds, the cottage remained quiet, allowing Layla to complete her daily tasks in peace.

She weeded the vegetable garden and cleaned the goat pen, then made a stew for dinner and took the dry laundry down from the clothesline. After finishing all her chores, she went for a walk alone in the forest. Wandering without any particular route in mind, she soon found herself at the riverside.

She climbed up the broad trunk of her favorite tree and, settling on a sturdy branch, gazed at the tranquil summer-evening scenery. It was beautiful. Up above, the sky was peppered with birds. Down below, the Schulter River was tinged red by the sunset. Atop the

river sat the cabin, which with its bright-white paint almost resembled a swan. It was all so beautiful.

As the sun continued to set, the upper skies turned a clear-blue color similar to that of the final piece of candy. She then realized that it was also the color of the duke's eyes. *Your eyes are the color of my sadness.* This thought made her feel melancholy, and yet she found herself laughing quietly.

Just then, she sensed someone approaching quickly. Looking down, she saw a familiar face near the foot of the tree. “Kyle!” she shouted joyfully. “How did you know I was here?”

“I know you like going on evening walks during the summer, and when you go on walks you always end up by the river.” There was no playfulness in his gaze. Instead, there was a warm, profound look in his eyes. Taken slightly aback by the look he was giving her, Layla stared silently back at him.

The breeze coming off the river shook the leaves, breaking the silence between them.

After a while, he said, “Layla?”

She tilted her head slightly in response.

“Let's get married,” he said.

These surreal-sounding words floated up to her on the soft evening breeze. As she stared at him with a blank, dream-like look on her face, he repeated himself, with more force behind his words this time.

“Let's get married, Layla.”

# Chapter 26:
## Let’s Get Married

The warm season came a little earlier in Ratse, the capital of the Berg Empire, located south of Karlsbar. While the roses at Arvis were just starting to bud, the whole city of Ratse was already heavy with the scent of roses.

Matthias suddenly realized this fact as he was strolling through the garden at the crown prince's palace. He stopped in his tracks, and the other officers walking with him stopped as well.

“Is something the matter?” one of them asked.

“No,” Matthias tersely replied, smiling slightly. “Nothing.”

A short silence followed and was broken when they continued walking.

The imperial guard officers, all of them young noblemen, chatted playfully about various topics. As they excitedly discussed how they would spend this wonderful spring weekend, most of them arrived at similar plans; parties, horse racing, or spring dates with their lovers.

“Our captain is going to have a lonely spring, since his fiancée is far away,” said one of the officers.

The rest of the group chuckled at this remark. Even Matthias himself smiled in acknowledgment.

The engagement ceremony of Duke Herhardt and Lady Claudine Brandt, held at the end of the previous summer, had been a success. Following their official betrothal, social circles had been abuzz with gossip about them for quite a while.

However, Matthias hadn't felt much of a change in his life. A week after the ceremony, he went to the capital to serve in the Berg military's imperial guard division. Meanwhile, Claudine left Arvis to return to the House of Brandt, which was located in a city near Karlsbar, far away from the capital city of Ratse.

Thus, nothing changed in their lives, other than the fact that their

engagement had been formally announced. During the social season, Claudine made occasional visits to Ratse, where she would stay in a mansion the Brandt family held there. But even this was nothing new, she had been doing it for years. She and Matthias also attended social events together, just as they had in the past. The only real change was that she was his fiancée, and he was her fiancé.

“My military service is almost over. What about you, Matthias?” asked one of the officers. The rest of the group turned their attention to Matthias.

“I'm thinking about extending mine another year,” he replied. Everyone reacted with shock at this unexpected response.

“Aren't you planning to get married and start focusing on the family business?” asked one of the officers.

“I think the wedding can wait until next year,” Matthias replied.

“All the buzz in social circles about the upcoming Herhardt-Brandt wedding is already starting to fade, and yet you're postponing it?”

Matthias nodded. More than a postponement, he viewed this timeline as the way circumstances had naturally ended up. He wanted to spend another year in the capital, while the Brandts wanted their daughter to spend her honeymoon at Arvis.

When the Brandt family had asked to postpone the engagement ceremony by a year, the Herhardt family had readily consented. Claudine was still young, so there was no need to hurry. Both families wanted the marriage to be perfect from the get go.

After leaving the imperial palace, Matthias went straight back to the mansion where he was staying.

The stone mansion, located in the heart of Ratse, was the second-oldest mansion owned by the Herhardt family, after the mansion at Arvis, their main estate. As the residence where for generations the head of the family had stayed when taking care of matters in the capital, its architecture and decor were more stark and modest than that of Arvis, which more reflected the taste of the Lady of the

House.

“The dowagers are here,” reported an attendant as Matthias exited the car.

“My Mother and Grandmother?”

“Yes, Your Grace. They arrived this morning. They came to attend the wedding of Her Highness the crown princess.”

Matthias nodded and slowly entered the mansion.

After suffering the embarrassment of being passed over for the role of Duchess Herhardt, the crown princess had hurried to find another potential spouse to whom to get engaged. She had settled on the grand duke of a neighboring duchy who was of similar social standing to Duke Herhardt.

“It's been a while, Matthias!” Katharina von Herhardt exclaimed, smiling brightly and opening her arms to greet her grandson as soon as he stepped into the mansion's main hall.

“I guess visits like this are the only way we can see your face these days,” Elise von Herhardt remarked, speaking more candidly than her mother-in-law as always.

Matthias smiled back at the women as he approached them. It was an ordinary, rosy weekend afternoon.

* * *

“This evening breeze feels so nice, Layla,” said Kyle as he parked his bicycle and walked towards Layla, smiling.

Layla turned her heard as soon as she heard the familiar voice. She had been helping Bill load the cart he had just brought from the garden. Bill, who was holding a shovel, also turned to look.

“Let's get married,” Kyle added in a matter-of-fact tone. He had been saying this so often, it no longer came as a surprise to them at all.

Layla and Bill soon resumed their work.

“Hi, Kyle,” Layla said warmly as she brought the remaining seedlings to the cart. “I'm not getting married,” she added in an exceedingly gentle tone, which only made her sound more

definitive in her rejection of his proposal.

Bill sighed bitterly.

Kyle, on the other hand, simply chuckled, having grown used to Layla's repeated rejections, and casually started helping her with her work. “Good,” he said, “I've received my rejection for today. I'll try again tomorrow.”

“No, don't.”

“I'm going to. People's hearts change day to day.” This inexperienced young man had perhaps the most brazen, obstinate spirit of anyone in the empire.

Bill tried to suppress his laughter as he glanced furtively at Kyle and Layla.

* * *

That loafer from the Ettman family had first proposed marriage to Layla at the end of summer the previous year and had continued to do so regularly throughout several changes of season. When Bill first heard about the first proposal, he figured it must have been due to one of two reasons, either the lightweight Kyle had been drinking, or he had simply gone crazy. Thus, Bill had refrained from hitting Kyle in the head with his shovel.

To Bill's surprise, however, Kyle had shown up the very next day, looking perfectly sane and sober, and had asked Layla to marry him once again.

By now, Bill had lost count of how many times Kyle had asked. As autumn turned into winter, and winter into spring, Kyle had asked her every single day, and she had rejected him every single time. At first, Bill had been in support of Layla's firm rejections, but recently he had begun to feel sorry for Kyle. If Kyle had been speaking only for himself, Bill would have been less understanding, but he changed his mind once he found out that Dr. Ettman had granted his permission as well.

The previous autumn, Dr. Ettman had paid a visit to Bill's cottage, and suggested that Bill send Layla off to college. When Bill

had hesitantly replied that as much as he would love to, his circumstances wouldn't allow that, Dr. Ettman had smiled brightly and said, *"If Layla and Kyle have feelings for each other and want to get married, wouldn't it be nice if we allow them to do that, and then send them off to college together?"*

It was a deeply moving suggestion, but Bill had simply stared at the doctor in response, hardly believing what he had heard. Bill cherished Layla more than anything in the world, but there were still many things in the world that he didn't understand, including the high position the Ettman family held in the Karlsbar social scene.

Dr. Ettman had seemed to understand this, so he had added, *"Kyle told me that Layla brings out the best in him and that he wants to live with her and become a good person for her sake."*

Bill had been quite surprised when he heard that the young rascal who was always hanging out at his cottage and eating up all his food had said such a thing.

*"He sounded quite sincere when he said it,"* Dr. Ettman had added. *"So much so that I couldn't brush it away as mere childish talk."*

*"But Doctor, Layla is..."* Bill had started to say before trailing off.

Dr. Ettman's smile had then grown even kinder. *"I don't require my son's bride to come from a wealthy or prestigious family. I know that Layla is a very good person, despite her humble origins."* His smile resembled that of his son. *"If Kyle hasn't changed his mind by the time he settles on a career path next year, then I would like to allow them to get married. How about you, Mr. Remmer?"*

If Bill were to have expressed his true feelings at that moment, he would have taken the guardian angel Dr. Ettman on his back and run around Karlsbar, or perhaps the entire Berg Empire, for joy. Of course, he knew doing that would have embarrassed Layla, so he curbed his enthusiasm.

But what was he going to do about Layla and her adamant refusals now?

Resolving to find a way to persuade her to change her mind, he

tossed the shovel into his shed.

* * *

“Oh, Matthias. You know Dr. Ettman's son, don't you?” Lady Herhardt quietly asked, changing the subject away from the tedious discussion that had been dragging on about the crown princess's wedding. Dowager Herhardt had gone to bed early, so Matthias and his mother were the only two at the dinner table.

“Yes, Mother,” Matthias calmly replied after taking a sip of water. “Kyle Ettman. Dr. Ettman's only child, right?”

“That's right. Well, I hear that he's getting married,” she said. Her sharp tone of voice suggested that she was aware that Kyle's bride-to-be was not someone to mention casually.

Matthias quietly waited for his mother to continue.

“His fiancée is that orphan girl that the gardener from our estate raised. I think her name is Layla?”

Matthias silently mouthed the name: *Layla.* “It's hard to believe the Ettman family would consider her a suitable bride,” he said in a quiet, flat tone of voice.

“That's what's so absurd about it,” Lady Herhardt replied. “Your grandmother put in so much effort trying to find the Ettman boy a worthy mate, and all for naught.” She sounded more nervous than before.

Matthias made no further response, but his mother proceeded to recount all the rumors she had heard surrounding Kyle Ettman's marriage decision, which had been causing a lot of buzz at Arvis. According to one rumor, Mrs. Ettman was quite displeased with her son's choice of bride. She had been hoping Kyle would marry a noblewoman, which would have resulted in the Ettman family gaining an aristocratic title.

Another rumor said that if all went according to plan, Layla would be going to college after getting married to Kyle. The couple would have their honeymoon in Ratse, and then attend college together. This would all happen once summer was over, once the

rose season had passed.

“Your grandmother is heartbroken,” Lady Herhardt said. “She's always been so fond of Dr. Ettman's son.”

“Yes, she has been, hasn't she?” Matthias put down his fork and knife and picked up his napkin, gripping it so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

“And poor Mrs. Ettman!” Lady Herhardt continued. “She has built up such a good standing in social circles, despite lacking a title. And now she's going to lose it all because of this ridiculous daughter-in-law.” She took a sip of wine to wet her lips. “What noblewoman would associate with a woman whose heir is married to a lowly orphan?”

“Perhaps circumstances will change,” Matthias said, straightening his posture. “They haven't gotten married yet, after all.”

“I don't know, Matthias. If that were possible, Mrs. Ettman wouldn't be so distraught. Dr. Ettman firmly supports his son's choice, and by all accounts, Kyle is madly in love with that orphan girl.” She clicked her tongue to express her sympathy for Mrs. Ettman, who was soon going to be shunned by high society. “The girl is certainly pretty. It was a mistake for his parents ever to let him spend time with her.” She rang a bell, and maids immediately entered with desserts. “I can't believe she managed to become the future Mrs. Ettman. How brazen of her! Or should I say, how cunning of her?” Shrugging, she lifted her dessert fork. “I suppose it's silly to blame her. The truly foolish one is Kyle, who is bringing disgrace upon his family because he was blinded by love.”

Now that Lady Herhardt had reached her desired conclusion, she changed the subject. As she started to blather on about various people from high society, Matthias sat quietly, barely listening.

*Layla.* The name lingered on his tongue, like the taste of fine wine. *Layla. Layla Llewellyn.*

# Chapter 27:
## A Rose Season Without You

Night had fallen by the time Matthias finished bathing and stepped out of the bathroom. Tying the belt of his robe loosely around his waist, he leaned against the frame of the open window that looked down onto the garden.

Compared to the beautiful garden and forest on the sprawling land of the renowned Arvis estate, this mansion's garden was more modest. Since the mansion was located in the middle of the city, the garden was naturally smaller, and neither Matthias nor any of the previous dukes had been particularly interested in landscaping.

Thus, the Ratse mansion's garden was simple, in keeping with the simple architecture and decor of the mansion itself. However, each year when the rose season arrived, a large quantity of roses were transported from Arvis to the Ratse mansion's garden, temporarily transforming the small garden into a spectacular sight to see.

A passing breeze carried the scent of the roses up to Matthias's room, and he thought about the upcoming summer break when he would return to Arvis. While thinking of this, his mind suddenly drifted to thoughts of Layla helping the gardener with various tasks throughout each summer day. He frowned.

*She always smelled like roses. Like the roses that the master gardener plants. The most beautiful roses in the world.* Little had Matthias expected that his downfall would come from something else raised by the gardener; Layla, a girl who was nothing. *What's in a name?*

He closed the window and turned around. His wet hair dripped on his feet.

*It seems that things have turned out rather well for her. Normally a girl like her wouldn't dream of being able to marry a doctor's son. Thanks to Kyle Ettman's foolish love, she's going to become Mrs. Ettman, and will even attend college here in the capital. She's remarkably lucky.*

“Layla...” he whispered to himself.

If that beautiful nuisance were to disappear from his sight, it would benefit him as well. For this reason, he should have been in full support of her marriage. However, even after closing the window, the scent of roses still lingered in his nose. After a moment, he realized that this was because there was a vase of roses on the credenza in his room. They looked to be roses from the garden.

He turned away from the vase to look at the golden birdcage in another corner of the room, before turning back to the vase.

“Layla.” Speaking the name at full volume, it sounded even sweeter to his ears. *It's rose season, but you're not here.*

Still lost in reminiscence, he reached out and grabbed the roses from the vase. They were a pale shade of pink, just like the color of Layla's cheeks when she was crying. He gripped the roses tighter, crushing them.

*It's good that things have turned out this way,* he thought. He wanted to believe this. *But...* His eyes slowly narrowed. *Can there really be a rose season without you? I always return to Arvis when the roses are in bloom. Could it really be that you won't be there?*

The doubts that followed these thoughts led him to an unexpected realization, that she had always been there in the garden during the summers when the roses were in full bloom. It was like she was a part of Arvis. Which also meant that she was his.

Having torn the roses out of the vase and crushed them, he couldn't bring himself to throw them aside. Just then, his bird started singing. At the same moment, for the first time in his life, he felt the desire to kill someone. This desire felt clear as day to him. What wasn't clear, however, was who it was directed towards the doctor's son, or her.

By the time he let go of the mushy handful of crushed rose heads, the night had grown fully dark. His rose-scented hands then picked up a document from the table and tore it in half. It was an application for a one-year extension of his military service.

* * *

“I approve,” Bill finally said with great confidence, after hesitating for a long time. Layla was looking at him from across the table with a puzzled look on her face.

“Of that rascal Kyle, I mean. I approve of him wholeheartedly. He has my full support.”

“Uncle Bill...” Layla whined, frowning.

Bill didn't stop. “Why don't you accept his proposal already? Marry him and you two can go to college together. I really want that for you, Layla.”

“I can't.”

“Don't you love him?”

“Sure, but it wouldn't make any sense for me to marry him.”

“What do you mean it wouldn't make any sense? What doesn't make sense about two people who love each other getting married?” Bill was starting to get worked up.

Layla's eyes remained calm. “If I married Kyle, he and his family would be a laughingstock in society.”

“Dr. Ettman himself has approved the marriage.”

“But...”

“Layla, clear your mind of all these random thoughts and look into your heart.” Bill was speaking louder now. “If you love Kyle, marry him. If you don't, then don't. It's really as simple as that.”

Layla remained silent for a moment, then lifted the beer glass in front of her and took a big swig.

Just as Bill had expected, she had grown up to become a great drinker. They were now drinking buddies who regularly chatted over beers.

“I love Kyle,” she said, wiping the beer foam from the side of her mouth. “I doubt I'll ever have another friend as warm and kind as him.” She looked at Bill with a more serious expression. “So I don't want to embarrass him.”

“What are you saying?! Where'd you get this low opinion of yourself, Layla?”

“It's not like that. I like myself how I am, Uncle Bill. I'm not ashamed of myself, no matter what people say about me. And I'm working hard to become an outstanding adult, just like you want.” She furrowed her brow. She had a pensive look in her eyes. “But I don't know anything about marriage, Uncle Bill. For all I know, if I got married, all my efforts to become an outstanding adult would go to waste.”

Bill chuckled. “Don't tell me you're planning to live your whole life in this cottage with an old widower, Layla.”

“I want to. I never want to leave Arvis's forest. And I never want to leave you.”

“That's a terrible thing to say, Layla.”

“Now that I have my teaching certificate, I want to get a job at a school nearby. And I want to keep living like this forever. Right here, with you, Uncle Bill. And now I'll be able to help you, too.”

“Where's the forest going to go? Nowhere. It's going to stay right here forever. As am I. Sure, eventually I'll grow too old and weak to continue working as a gardener and I'll have to leave. But I'm still strong and healthy. I bet I still have well over a decade of work left in me.” He took a couple of gulps of his beer. “No matter where you go or what you do, even if you get married, even if you go to college, you'll always be my little Layla.” He reached across the table and squeezed Layla's little hand.

The college entrance exam was coming up very soon, but Layla had been showing no signs of changing her mind. Bill was worried about this so much that he had arranged for them to have this chat.

“If you marry into the Ettman family, we'll be neighbors. What could be better than that?”

“Uncle Bill.”

“And Layla, it's rare to meet a man who you can be sure would make a good husband and a good father. But Kyle is just such a man.” He smiled and patted the back of her hand. “Think about it. Think about how great it would be to marry that wonderful guy and start a real family with him. Your house will be filled with the

sound of your children's laughter. And Kyle will keep you from ever being lonely."

"We're a real family, aren't we?" she asked, stroking his fingers. She looked up at him. Her eyes were moist. "You and I are a family, Uncle Bill. A real family."

"Well..." Now Bill was tearing up as well. *Why is she always making me cry?* "If you think we're a real family, that should be all the more reason for you to listen to what I say!" He placed an envelope in front of her that he had prepared in advance.

She picked it up and opened it, and her eyes went wide. It contained a train ticket to Ratse, and some money to cover travel expenses.

"The test is next week, so you'd better start studying hard first thing tomorrow. I know you always work hard, but if you want to pass this test, you'll have to step it up a notch. If you don't go to Ratse, it means you think of us as a fake family."

"Uncle Bill!"

"And if you don't take the entrance exam, I'm not going to see you again, Layla." He let go of her hand and, straightening his shoulders, looked at her sternly. Nonetheless, there was a limitless tenderness behind the sternness.

Holding the envelope in her hands, she sank into thought. He looked at her with a deep gaze. She looked just as bright and lovely as when he had first met her.

Soon, she seemed to have made up her mind. With a solemn expression on her face, she lifted her beer glass and held it out towards him, just like she had done with her apple juice when she was a little girl.

Bill readily lifted his glass and clinked it against hers. She downed the glass in an instant. Soon her cheeks would flush, but for the time being, she was doing a good job imitating an experienced drinker.

"If I were to fail the test, we'd still be a real family, right?" she asked with glistening eyes.

This question almost brought him to tears again. “I'll have to think about that,” he bluntly replied, before flashing a tender smile at her.

She smiled warmly back at him. Just as members of a real family do.

* * *

“Yeah, I think you'll like that place most of all; the natural history museum,” Kyle confidently asserted. “It'll be like heaven to you.” He had been reciting a list of all the must-see places in Ratse, and had gotten most excited when it came time to talk about the natural history museum.

Flowery spring scenery was visible out the window as the train chugged along.

This was Layla's first time visiting Ratse, but Kyle had been there many times to visit family, so he knew the capital city well. He had suggested that she stay with him at his relatives' house, but she had opted to stay in a nearby hotel instead.

“You'll probably be too tired to go today, so how about tomorrow?” he asked.

“I've got to study for the test.”

“What good will it do to study now when the test is right around the corner? You've already studied plenty in advance.”

“Wow, you're certainly full of confidence, Mr. Ettman.”

“But of course, Miss Llewellyn.”

“Impressive!”

“That's why you should marry me.”

*Of course. Why didn't I expect him to say that today, like he does every other day?* Rather than verbally rejecting him this time, she just stared intently into his eyes.

He squirmed at her unexpected reaction. “Wh-what's the matter?”

“Kyle, can you picture it?”

“Picture what?”

“The two of us as husband and wife.” Her expression grew

solemn, while he started to blush.

“Of course I can! I can picture it! Easily!” he replied.

“I don't know. Seems a little weird to me. The thought of us getting married, having kids, and all that.”

“What do you mean? It doesn't seem weird to me at all.”

“Really? The thought of us engaging in reproductive behavior to create a child, bearing that child and raising it, that doesn't seem weird to you?”

“Rep... reproduct... huh?” He couldn't believe his ears. Certain that he had misheard her, he just stared.

Layla looked right back at him with an innocent expression, and dropped the bomb once more. “Reproductive behavior. It's nothing to be embarrassed about, Kyle. It's a natural function that all sorts of living things, including birds and flowers, take part in to preserve their species.”

“Do you really understand the words that are coming out of your mouth right now?”

“Sure. I'm not great at geometry, but I do well in other subjects,” she replied, smiling proudly.

Kyle was now feeling quite flustered.

“So yeah, Kyle, I just think it's weird to think about us doing that kind of thing, and…”

“Uh... here, Layla, eat this,” Kyle said, sticking a sandwich half into Layla's mouth to shut her up.

It wasn't yet summer, but inside the train, it felt as hot as an oven.

Layla chewed and swallowed the sandwich, then opened her mouth to begin talking again.

Before she could, however, Kyle put a cookie into her mouth. “Eat this too.” *Please, please don't talk about that stuff anymore,* he thought, shaking his head.

The words Bill had said to him that morning when he had come to pick up Layla flashed into his mind: *“If you get any funny ideas, think of my shovel.”* Bill's smile as he said this had been kind, yet

somehow ominous.

Kyle pictured the huge, dirt-covered shovel, which looked almost like a weapon in Bill's hand.

“So Kyle, what I'm saying is...” Layla said, having finished the cookie. The cookie crumbs on her lips made them look even more cute than usual.

“Layla, if you say one more word...” Kyle muttered, clutching his head.

“Huh?”

“If you say one more word...” he repeated, thinking of Bill's shovel, “...I'm going to jump off the train.”

# Chapter 28:
## A Bird Flying Through the Spring Sky

“While I respect your decision, I can't help but feel disappointed,” said Colonel Pharrell, commanding officer of the imperial guard.

Matthias listened calmly as his superior officer continued.

“One never likes to lose a capable officer. Of course, I'm just speaking from my perspective as a soldier. I acknowledge it would be a greater loss for the empire as a whole if you were to continue to serve in the military, considering how much you'll be able to contribute to society as a civilian duke.” More than mere politeness, the disappointment in the colonel's eyes looked sincere. He had expected to receive a document from Captain Herhardt requesting a one-year service extension, so he was quite surprised to receive a discharge application instead. He considered trying to persuade him to reconsider, but decided this wouldn't be appropriate when he saw that he had listed his grandmother as the reason for his discharge.

“Thank you for everything, Sir,” Matthias said. As a duke, he outranked Pharrell in civilian terms, but in this context military rank was all that mattered, so he used the utmost politeness when addressing him.

Pharrell appreciated this about Matthias, as many other aristocratic officers found it difficult to show proper deference to superior officers who were of a lower social rank than themselves. He also appreciated that Matthias had chosen a post at an overseas war front that was in particular need of help from capable officers. “Be sure to pay me a visit whenever you're in Ratse,” he said, offering his hand to Matthias.

“Of course, Sir,” Matthias replied. He firmly shook the colonel's hand, then left his office.

Stepping outside, he was greeted by the bright spring sunshine. He got into his car and was driven to downtown Ratse. After

meeting with a few more superior officers there, the multi-day discharge process was finally complete.

Walking back towards the car, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. He had been caught off guard by the sight of someone walking down the sidewalk on the other side of the street. There was no mistaking her for anyone else, it was Layla.

The chauffeur walked up to him. “Your Grace?”

“Go back without me,” he curtly replied, still looking across the street.

It was Layla. It made no sense that she would be in Ratse, but he had no doubt that it was her.

He crossed the street with long strides.

* * *

The museum seemed no less massive on the second visit. Looking around with just as much wonder as on the first day she had gone there, Layla took in the sight of the impressive building housing the Berg Empire's natural history museum.

The day after they arrived in Ratse, the first place Kyle had taken Layla was this museum. Located across the street from each other, Ratse's art museum and natural history museum were among the capital city's most popular tourist destinations. Layla was used to Karlsbar, a city just as large and prosperous as Ratse. But standing in between these two magnificent museums, she was spellbound, Karlsbar had nothing of the sort.

Friends of hers from school who had visited the capital had all gushed over the beautiful art museum. But for Layla, the choice to visit the natural history museum first had been a no-brainer. Just as Kyle had predicted, it was like heaven to her. The only problem was that it was too big to see all its exhibits in one day.

She had figured that after devoting an entire day to wandering its halls, she would need to spend another full day there before there they left Ratse to see everything. She walked excitedly into the museum's lobby.

Kyle had offered to come along with her again, but this time she had turned down his offer. She had completed her exam the previous day, but his was coming up tomorrow. Even though he had stressed the importance of early studying for exams, she didn't feel comfortable bringing him to a museum the day before an exam.

Before entering the exhibition hall, she made sure she was ready.

*Comfortable shoes: check.*

*Notebook and pen: check.*

*Feeling well-rested and full of stamina: chec*k.

With her notebook and pen in hand, she walked hurriedly towards an exhibit she hadn't had time to see on the first visit.

* * *

Layla looked like a girl headed out to a picnic.

Matthias gazed at her as she excitedly walked from exhibit to exhibit without any sign of slowing down.

He had already been confident that the woman he saw was Layla before she entered the natural history museum, but he had still decided to follow her in, keeping his distance. Even after having satisfied his curiosity about what she was doing, he wanted to keep observing her for a bit longer.

Then it occurred to him that it was the time of year when the college entrance exam was being held in Ratse. If she had come to the capital to take the exam, it meant that she must have made up her mind to go to college after all. Which meant she had probably decided to marry Kyle Ettman as well.

She was standing in front of a glass display case filled with various plant specimens, intently jotting something down in her notebook. There was an enraptured smile on her face, as if she were looking at a rare gemstone or something.

Matthias had no idea what it was about the plant specimens that could possibly be making her smile like that. He considered approaching her, then decided to stand back and watch for a bit longer. Once he approached, he knew she would stop smiling. With

his hands behind his back, he continued to follow her.

For the most part, she seemed not to have changed much since the previous summer when he had last seen her, but there were some subtle differences. Her face looked more slender, her expression looked more relaxed, and her movements looked more graceful. Wearing a white dress with lace trim, she looked more mature as well.

After spending a long time looking at everything, she left the plant specimen exhibit and started walking down the passageway to the next exhibit room, when she suddenly stopped in her tracks. Matthias knew the reason for this at once.

The passageway was like heaven. It was decorated with silver-painted tree branches that had white feathers attached to them like leaves. Hanging from the branches were multi-colored crystal ornaments shaped like birds. The light reflecting off them gave the passageway a dream-like quality.

She marveled at the sight. “Wow...”

Matthias heard her innocent exclamation.

Watching her run excitedly around the passageway, he couldn't help but grin. Her thick blonde hair and lacy white dress fluttered as she ran about like a little girl.

She then came to a stop in the middle of that wondrous passageway and, standing on her tiptoes, reached out to try to touch one of the ornaments, but the bird remained tantalizingly just beyond her fingertips.

As she continued to gasp in amazement with her head raised to look at the ceiling, Matthias started to walk towards her. Before she had noticed that anyone was there, he had come up behind her, put his arms around her waist, and lifted her off the ground.

Startled, she turned her head to look around, but she was already floating in mid-air. The crystal bird that she had been unable to reach was now glittering right in front of her eyes. She felt like a bird flying through the spring sky, able to go wherever it wanted. It was a strange, beautiful, dream-like feeling.

Matthias then casually set her back down on the ground. The skirt of her dress ballooned out, then slowly descended, gently tickling her calves.

The sensation of touching the crystal bird still lingered in her hands. Hiding her hands behind her back, she looked up in a daze. Matthias slowly removed his officer's cap. The same blue eyes she had seen that late-summer afternoon the previous year were looking at her.

* * *

Under the museum's dome was a café that sold snacks and beverages. The first time she visited the museum, she had eaten lunch there with Kyle.

Matthias started walking in that direction. Noticing at once where he was headed, she stopped and frowned at him. “It was nice to see you, Your Grace, but I'll be on my way now.”

He looked over his shoulder at her. Catching her breath, she curtsied to him and started to walk the other way.

“Stop right there,” he ordered.

Ignoring him, she casually walked a few more steps, but ultimately wasn't able to get away. In the blink of an eye, he had dashed passed her and now stood blocking her way.

She could feel passersby looking at them. “Why are you doing this, Your Grace?” she asked, looking around in annoyance. “I hate it.”

“You hate what?”

“What you're doing. I hate it.”

His nonchalance was irritating her even more.

“You can't do this,” she said. Her hands started fidgeting, so she moved them to the straps of the bag she had slung over her shoulder and gripped them tightly. “So if you could please...”

“Would you like to do something that we shouldn't do, then?” he asked, grinning.

This provoked her anger even more. Frowning, she shook her

head vigorously. “No!” Her hands started to tremble from the feeling of humiliation. “Absolutely not!” She felt her cheeks burning and she knew they were bright red. In a vicious cycle, embarrassment over the fact that she was blushing made her blush even more.

Meanwhile, the duke seemed completely relaxed. He slowly looked around, taking in the surroundings, then turned his gaze back towards her. “Having made this chance encounter in the capital with you, the orphan who lives on my estate, I would simply like to buy you a cup of coffee. Is there a problem with my making such a kind gesture?” Even while insulting her like this, his tone remained polite and detached. “There's not, is there?” The smile left his face, and his eyes went cold. “Don't you agree, Layla?” He then continued walking towards the café.

She let out a long, exasperated sigh as she watched him walk. She couldn't claim to know Duke Herhardt well, but there was one thing about him she knew for sure; that he would use whatever means necessary to get what he wanted, and that the harder something was for him to obtain, the more he wanted it. Giving up, she trudged along behind him.

* * *

Shortly after the order had been placed, the waiter brought out two cups of coffee. Steam rose from the cups between the two people sitting in silence.

“I never would have expected to run into you in a place like this, Your Grace,” Layla hesitantly began after finding the silence unbearable. “I didn't realize you were interested in natural history, so...”

“I'm not,” Matthias replied, cutting her off. He took a sip of his coffee. “You already know, Layla,” he continued, smirking, “I don't care about such things at all.”

“Then why did you...”

“And you must realize this isn't a coincidence, either.”

“No,” she reflexively replied. Her body tensed up, and her heart started beating faster. She would have rather remained a lowly orphan that he pitied. She didn't wanted to become anything more to him. “All I know...” Her voice had started to tremble, so she gulped before continuing. “All I know is that you hate me, Your Grace.” Suddenly, the traumatic memory of her first kiss flashed into her mind. She shut her eyes to try to rid her mind of it, but it was no use. She opened them again and saw Matthias's blue eyes gazing at her. The memories intensified and took hold of her.

“You're right. I hate you,” he calmly agreed. A wry smile formed on his face. “And now, I hate you even more deeply, Layla.”

# Chapter 29:
## A Failed Wish

Soon the smile left Matthias's face, and he looked at Layla with a cold, harsh glare.

She involuntarily gasped. Then, feeling that she no longer had the confidence to look at him anymore, she fixed her eyes on her coffee cup and said, “I'm going to be moving.”

“What?”

“I'm going to be moving away, so that I won't disturb your estate anymore.”

“Where are you moving to?”

“Anywhere but there.” She clenched her fists to stop her hands from shaking. *Don't be afraid,* she told herself, even though she knew it was no use. “Arvis isn't the only place I can live,” she added, matching his cold tone.

The duke made no response, as if he found her words ridiculous.

She felt like getting up and leaving right away, but suddenly something else that had happened the previous summer flashed into her mind. She remembered when, after she had refused to finish the food he had served her at his cabin, he had taken her hat and thrown it into the cold river. She didn't want to risk him reacting in a similar manner again, so she resolved to finish her coffee before leaving.

Lifting the cup, she gulped down the hot drink, almost choking in the process. Once she could see the bottom of the cup, she gasped for air.

“Layla,” he said in a low, threatening tone.

She stiffly reached into her bag and retrieved some coins, which she then set on the table.

“What's that for?” he asked, chuckling.

“It's to pay for my coffee,” she replied, still looking at her hands.

“Do I seem like someone who needs to be reimbursed for a cup of

coffee?”

“Maybe not, but I don't want you paying for my coffee, Your Grace.” Her fingers felt cold now, and her fingertips were turning white. She was persisting in her refusal to let him pay, however. They weren't at Arvis, after all.

“Look up,” he said.

“No.”

“Look up, Layla.”

“Don't order me around like that,” she said. Letting her anger show, she finally looked up at him. Her rage had wiped away her fear. “I'm not your maid.”

“My maid?”

“Just because I was raised by Uncle Bill at Arvis, doesn't mean that I'm your maid.”

“Really? Then what are you?”

“I'm... nothing.” Tears started to form in her eyes. “I always have been, and always will be.” Her moist, green eyes remained fixed on him as she rejected him.

He quietly held his coffee cup, thinking back to the day he had wanted to wring her neck; that late-summer afternoon when he had felt every bit as dirty as his clothes had gotten after rolling around on the ground with that worthless woman. *What if I had gone ahead and strangled you that day? I probably wouldn't feel as bad as I do right now, clinging to this nothing woman because of an inexplicable impulse.* He took the coins she had placed on the table and stood up. Walking over to her, he slowly placed the money on her lap. “Take it and leave.”

Looking up at him, her eyes grew more tearful. Staring down at her, he took a few gold coins from his pocket and tossed them onto her lap as well. “This too.”

“What are you…”

“You should say *thank you*, Layla,” he said, smirking.

Her eyes continued to tear up.

“That's what you say when Claudine pays you, isn't it? You

always thank her politely."

Her lip twitched as if she wanted to make a retort, but no sound came out of her mouth.

"Since I took up your precious time when you're not my maid, it's only right that I pay you for your troubles."

She gritted her teeth, but couldn't stop the tears from starting to flow.

"If you don't want to think of it that way, think of it as alms for a poor orphan."

The tears streaming down her cheeks looked like gems.

"You love a guy who has offered to marry you out of pity, and yet you're too proud to accept a few measly coins? Ridiculous."

Not wanting to back down, she continued to glare at him, but the tears continued to flow down her cheeks.

Feeling relief, he walked toward the exit of the café. Layla hadn't smiled for him, but at least she hadn't been able to resist crying. *If I can't make you smile, making you cry will have to do. Either one is as good as the other to me. If all I can give you is tears, that's what I'll give you. If I can give you pain, I'll give you that too. Then at least you won't be able to ignore my existence.*

Before exiting the café, he looked over his shoulder at her one last time. She had removed her glasses and set them on the table, and was sobbing into her hands.

As he sauntered out of the natural history museum, he made two wishes. The first wish was that she would get married to the doctor's son as soon as possible, so that she would be out of his life for good. The second wish was that she would never forget the tears and pain he had caused her.

* * *

The sun was nearly set, but Layla still hadn't returned to the hotel. Kyle, who had come to have dinner with her, stepped out of the hotel's front door with a worried look on his face. She wasn't a child, but she didn't know the city, and he knew that there were

shady types all over, just waiting for an innocent out-of-towner to prey upon.

“Well, she's fearless, but still...”

He anxiously started running down the street. He had assumed she would still be at the museum, but when he got there, it was already closed. He looked all around the building's surroundings, but she was nowhere in sight.

*Could she have gotten lost?*

He started running faster.

*Or could she have run into a criminal?*

This horrible thought made his heart sink. Just then, however, he found her, standing in front of a fountain in a park at the end of the street the museum was on. She appeared to be tossing a coin towards the bronze statue at the center of the fountain.

“Layla!” he shouted.

She turned her head towards him “Huh, Kyle?” She seemed surprised to see him as if it hadn't occurred to her that he would have been worried. “What are you doing here?”

Sweeping his sweaty hair off his forehead, he approached her.

“Why did you come all the way here?” she asked. “Shouldn't you be studying for the exam?”

“That's your concern right now? You really... truly, you...” He put his hand on her shoulder as he panted. Eventually, he caught his breath.

“Are you all right, Kyle? Want to sit down?” she asked, observing his face with worry.

*She's worried about me right now?* he thought to himself. Reaching up, he put his hot, sweaty hands on either side of her face, and let out a sigh mixed with some hollow laughter. That was when he noticed that her eyes were a little swollen. “Layla, have you been crying?”

“No.”

Her quick, terse response confirmed it for him. “Why were you crying?”

“I wasn't.”

“Who made you cry?”

“I said I wasn't crying.” Grinning at him, she brushed his hands away from her face. “I just looked around the museum. Then I took a walk around this park, and made wishes at the fountain.”

“Wishes?”

“Yeah. I saw people doing that.” She pointed at the fountain. Brightly-smiling people were making wishes and tossing coins into it. “One of my wishes was for you to get into medical school.”

“Does the coin have to get in there for the wish to come true?” he asked, chuckling as he pointed at the basin the statue was holding. He had noticed the disappointed cries of people whose coins had missed the basin.

“Don't worry, I made it in every time,” she proudly replied. “I'm a natural at this kind of thing.”

“That doesn't surprise me.”

“Hey, it's already dinnertime. Are you hungry? I'll just make one more wish and then we can go.” Holding a shiny gold coin in her hand, she walked up to the front of the fountain.

He rushed after her. “Layla! Have you been throwing *gold* coins? You're usually so frugal!”

Instead of replying, she simply tossed the coin with all her might. However, it missed.

It bumped against the outer edge of the basin and fell into the base of the fountain. She let out a devastated cry.

“I thought you were a natural...?”

“What the heck? I made every single one before this into the basin!”

“How many gold coins did you throw...?” he asked, laughing at this side of Layla he hadn't seen before. “Fine. Since you've already helped out the city of Ratse by making such a large donation to its fountain, I might as well throw one myself.”

“Hey, stop!” she shouted, putting her hand over the hand with which he had just retrieved a coin from his pocket. “Don't waste

money like that!”

“You're really saying that to me when you've just thrown away all those gold coins?”

“Those coins were expendable.”

“I didn't realize there were expendable and non-expendable coins.”

“There are!” she firmly shouted. “Don't throw it. It's a waste. I'd rather you spent it on ice cream.”

“Now you sound like the Layla I know.” He put the coin back in his pocket. “Let's go, Layla.” Even though he knew she would reject it, he offered her his hand.

She made it as if she was going to clasp his hand, but then just tapped it and walked ahead of him.

He increased his pace to catch up with her. “So, what did you wish for?”

“I wished for Uncle Bill's health and happiness. And for you to get into medical school and become a good doctor. And for me to become an outstanding adult. I made it into the basin for all of these.”

“What about the last one?”

“Huh?”

“The last wish. The one where you missed the basin.”

“Oh, that...” Her smile was replaced with a serious expression. “That's a secret.” She shook her head as if ridding herself of an unpleasant thought, then started walking with longer strides.

Kyle decided against pressing her about the final wish. Smiling cheerfully, he said, “Let's go get something good to eat, Layla. I'm so hungry after running all over looking for you.”

* * *

Dr. Ettman opened his bedroom door with a sigh. Turning on the lamp, he saw his wife lying on the bed. She had been lying there continuously since Kyle and Layla had left for Ratse to take the college entrance exam.

“Dinner's ready, Honey,” he said. “Let's go.”

“Leave me alone,” she said in a forceful tone that seemed at odds with her feeble appearance.

“I understand how you feel, honey, but…”

“No,” she said, cutting him off, “you don't understand. The kind, generous Dr. Ettman could never understand.” She sat up in bed and glared at him angrily.

“You like Layla too, don't you, Honey?”

“Sure I do. Layla's a great kid. If it weren't for you and Kyle, I would have nothing but goodwill towards her.”

“Nothing is changing about her just because she's marrying Kyle, Honey. All that's happening is Kyle is marrying that great kid whom he so dearly loves.”

“You might think of me as shallow and materialistic for saying this, but marriage is real life. You've approved a marriage for our son that will lower his social status!

“The world is changing, honey. The 'social status' that you're referring to will soon be a thing of the past.”

“No. Never,” she firmly replied as she put her hair up into a tidy bun. She got out of bed and stood in front of her husband. For all the meals she had missed over the last few days, she looked surprisingly alert and full of strength. “Social status will never disappear from human society. Even if aristocratic titles are abolished, people will come up with some other way to decide who's above and who's below.”

“Honey.”

“And no matter what that new system is, Layla and our Kyle won't match. This is a fact that will never change.” With these cold words, Mrs. Ettman brushed past her husband.

Dr. Ettman watched his wife as she walked out to the garden. When he noticed that their housekeeper was standing nearby, he gave her an awkward smile. “I'm sorry Mrs. Becker. You can clear the dinner table.” Quietly sighing, he walked out into the dark garden to stand with his wife.

# Chapter 30:
## I'll Do My Best

After eating a large dinner, Layla and Kyle walked down the street, each with an ice cream cone in hand. It was already dark out, and she had urged him to go back to the house where he was staying so he could prepare for the following day's exam, but he was being stubborn.

"This is part of my preparation," he insisted. "Walking with you will help my digestion."

She couldn't argue with his reasoning. "Fine, then let's walk a little more. But Kyle...?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do you want to marry me?" she cautiously asked, licking the cold, sweet ice cream from her lips. "If it's because you pity me..."

"Layla," he firmly said.

She was taken aback by his uncharacteristically stern tone.

He stepped around to face her. "Do you think of me as some sort of crazy guy who would marry someone out of pity?"

Frightened by his harsh tone, she made no reply.

"Sure," he said. "It's a big world, and there are plenty of crazy guys out there, some of whom would probably do such a thing. But I'm not one of them, Layla." He let out a long sigh to calm his indignation. "You want to know why I want to marry you? It's because I love you."

"Kyle..."

"That's it. That's my reason. Because I love Layla Llewellyn." Looking at her nervous face, he sighed again and chuckled a bit. "Anyway, why should I pity you? I've tried proposing to you hundreds of times, and you've turned me down every time. If anything, you should be pitying me, Layla."

He gently tousled her hair, then started walking ahead of her, not

wanting to let her see the silly expression he was sure was on his face.

As if she understood this, she stayed a pace behind him as they walked.

They continued walking silently for a while, eventually reaching the hotel.

“Good night, Layla,” he said, smiling. “Oh wait, I almost forgot.” Looking down at his melting ice cream, he slowly raised his head to look into her eyes. “Let's get married, Layla.” Even though he knew she was going to reject him, proposing to her had become a daily ritual, and it felt strange omitting it.

This time, however, rather than saying *“Good night, Kyle,”* and heading inside, she just stood there, saying nothing.

He narrowed his eyes at her in puzzlement. He fully expected her to say the friendly but blunt sentence *“I'm not going to get married.”* Instead, she said something he could barely believe.

“Okay.”

“Wh... Layla?” He dropped his cone out of shock. The melted ice cream splashed against his shoe, but he didn't care. “Uh... did you just say... that you'll marry me?” he stammered.

With her eyes lowered, she nodded her head.

“Y-you're... agreeing to get married? Married... to me?” he asked again in a shaky voice.

She looked at him with a bashful expression and once again nodded her head.

She seemed like she was about to say something else, but before she could, Kyle let out an ecstatic shriek as he wrapped his arms around her. “Woohoo!”

Several startled passersby stopped and stared, but Kyle didn't care. He lifted Layla up in the air and spun her round and round, paying no mind to her startled cries.

It was a sweet spring night.

* * *

That night, Kyle dreamed that he and Layla got married and lived an ordinary, happy life as a married couple.

Once, smiling bashfully, Layla had said to him, *“One day long from now, when I get my own house, I want to have a little flower bed. I'm going to plant roses in that bed. When they bloom, I'm going to be really happy.”*

In the dream, she was standing next to the flower bed, looking even more beautiful than the roses that were blooming in it. Their children were running joyfully around nearby. The children's laughter rang out in the sunshine.

*“Daddy...!”* shouted one of the children, running towards Kyle.

The little girl had blonde hair, just like Layla. Next to her was a younger boy, still a toddler, who jumped to his feet and greeted Kyle.

Kyle hugged the girl and lifted her into his arms. Walking towards Layla, he felt a gentle breeze blowing. It carried the sweet scent of roses. Layla smiled at him. Her smile was even more beautiful than the whole beautiful dream had been up to that point.

Eventually, Kyle woke up, still feeling the sensations of the dream lingering in his awareness. Perhaps because of the joy the dream had brought him, he did even better on the exam than he had expected to. *Is my dream about to come true? Could there be such a wonderful blessing in this world?*

He was so happy as he stepped out of the exam hall, he felt like he could fly. When he saw Layla, who was waiting for him on a bench nearby, he really felt like he was starting to float in the air. “Layla!” he shouted.

Turning to look at him, she closed the small book she had been reading and put it into the bag she had slung over her shoulder, then cheerfully started walking towards him. “How was the exam? Was it hard? Do you think you did well?”

“You're always worrying,” he said, raising his chin with swagger. “Layla, I'm Kyle Ettman. When it comes to studies, I never place second.”

“Ah, yes, of course, that's right...” she replied, nodding exaggeratedly before bursting into laughter. “I forgot how smart you were, Mr. Ettman.”

“Wow, that's a shame. Make sure to remember it from now on,” he replied, playing along with her joke. He then furtively reached over to grab her hand.

She flinched, but didn't pull her hand away. The late-afternoon spring sunlight shone on Kyle's face as he smiled at her.

“Do you really think you did well?” she asked, unable to stop herself from feeling slightly anxious.

He chuckled at her question and replied, “Don't worry. We're not going to have the misfortune of me failing the exam and us not being able to go to college together.”

“That's not what I was talking about...” She started to blush.

As he looked at her reddening cheeks, they began to remind him of well-ripened peaches, and soon his neck felt hot. He regretted the fact that they were still on the busy campus around the exam hall. If they had been on an empty street, he might have felt brave enough to kiss her. *No. If I did that, she might get scared and pull back. I need to wait a bit longer. That's right, just think of the shovel.* He thought of Bill's big, dirty shovel, and the ominous smile on Bill's face.

The two strolled around the campus, holding hands, all the way from the medical school building where he would be studying, to the biology building where she would. As they walked, they took note of the distance between the buildings and laughed as they chatted.

“You'll obviously pass, but I'm not so sure about myself,” she muttered as they arrived in front of the biology building.

“Why are you worrying about that? Didn't you say you thought you did well on the exam?”

“Sure, but they only admit a very small number of female students each year.” Her expression grew sullen.

“Ah,” he replied, “that's right.”

It had only been a few years since the Berg Empire's universities had begun allowing female students to enroll, and they still only admitted a small proportion of female applicants, so it was much harder for female students to get a college education than male students.

“Well even so, you're going to get in,” he confidently asserted. “Who else could they possibly choose above you?”

“You don't think you're being a bit overconfident?”

“Not at all. It's a highly reliable conclusion I reached on the basis of the eight years I've known you.”

“Eight years... time sure does fly.” She still vividly remembered riding in the mail coach towards Arvis. Somehow, eight years had passed since then. Suddenly, she was struck by the sight of the fully-grown young man that Kyle had become.

“What's the matter?” he asked, wondering why she was staring at him so intently.

“You've grown so much,” she solemnly exclaimed.

Whenever she made this sort of random comment, it only made him love her more. It gave him a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. Even so, he wasn't sure how to respond. “Sure,” he finally said, grinning. “I've grown tall enough to be your husband.”

She gasped playfully at this sly comment.

“Do you like how I look?” he asked.

“Well… hard to say.” Flustered, she started walking ahead with stiff steps.

Seeing her acting shy like that made him smile even more warmly.

On their way back, he told her about his beautiful dream, which would soon become reality; their house, the life they would share together there, their beautiful children, and the new chapter in the history of the Ettman family that they and their children would write. He noticed with gladness that she was listening with what looked to be tentative anticipation. He wanted to turn that anticipation into reality. He even went as far as to wonder whether

doing so was the reason he had been put on this earth.

“How many kids should we have?” he asked. “Personally, I'd like it if we have a daughter and a son.”

“Hmm... I think five would be about right.”

He was shocked by the number she named, which seemed to be quite at odds with the hesitant way she usually discussed their future life together.

Smiling brightly, she went on. “If we have a lot of kids like that, none of them will be lonely. And they'll be able to rely on each other for help when they need it. I love the thought of our home filled with a bunch of faces that resemble each other.”

Despite the joyful look on her face, he felt a pang in his chest. Her bright smile only made him realize how lonely a life she had led. “Five kids...? All right, Layla. I'll do my best!”

“Huh?” Her eyes widened at his bold reply.

Staring at each other, they both started to blush at almost the same instant.

“I w-wasn't talking about... *that*,” he said, taking a step back. He was blushing more brightly than she was. “That's not all I think about, you know!”

“Me neither!” she replied.

Both of them felt too embarrassed to make eye contact. They stopped holding hands, and started walking with a bit of distance between them.

Soon, stealing a sidelong glance at her, he burst into laughter, saying, “But Layla, if you're too shy for this sort of talk, how do you expect us to make five babies?”

With a gasp, she turned and glared at him.

“Miss Llewellyn, I know you excel at all subjects other than geometry. You didn't expect a stork to come with five babies in its beak, did you?”

Now that he was teasing her even more, she started walking faster, still frowning. His delighted laughter grew louder along with the accelerating sound of her heels clicking on the ground. “Wait

up, Mrs. Ettman!” he playfully shouted. His voice reverberated throughout the campus.

She started to run. Her braided ponytail bounced and swung behind her.

He relished the sight as he watched her from behind. He felt like he was back in that wonderful dream. He didn't want to wake up. Ever.

# Chapter 31:
## Kind Yet Coldhearted

*Is it because that last coin didn't go in?*

When Layla heard that Duke Herhardt would be returning to Arvis, the first thing she thought of was the last throw she had made at the fountain, when the coin had missed the basin.

She was certain she had heard that the duke was going to spend another year serving in the imperial guard, and yet now she was learning that this wasn't the case anymore. Instead, he was going to tie up any loose ends in the capital, then move back to Arvis where he would live full-time. The elderly Dowager Herhardt wanted her grandson to live with her, looking after the estate, and it seemed that he could no longer ignore her wish.

*Well, I don't care,* Layla thought as she stretched her arms before tying her apron tightly around her waist. *His life is no longer of any concern to me. I'm just a little upset that that last coin he gave me missed the basin after I wished that I would never see him again.*

After leaving Arvis the previous summer, he had not visited at all for an entire year. She had assumed this pattern would continue until his military service was complete. As long as she moved away from Arvis before then, her wish would have come true.

Shaking her head, she stepped out of the cottage into the backyard. *Maybe my wish will come true anyway. The duke is returning, but I'm moving away from here.*

Breathing a sigh of relief, she tended to the animals and the vegetable garden. Just as she was finishing up her morning chores, her pigeon Phoebe returned from the Ettmans' house. A note from Kyle was wrapped around her ankle: *My mom wants to invite you to dinner tonight. See, Layla? I was right!*

She felt like she could hear Kyle's voice behind the words of the note.

To calm Layla's concerns, he had guaranteed that his mother was

going to come around to liking her eventually. He had assured her that everything was going to turn out all right, that by the fall they would be a married couple strolling the university campus together. They would be happy, very happy.

“Uncle Bill, I'm going to go to the Ettmans' for dinner tonight,” she said, hurrying towards Bill as he arrived back at the cottage. “Mrs. Ettman invited me.”

“See, Layla?” he cheerfully replied, saying the same thing Kyle had said in his note. “Didn't I tell you everything would turn out all right?”

She smiled at the sight of his smile. Her heart was pounding, which she chalked up to the excitement.

* * *

Matthias returned to Arvis late one afternoon. As his car pulled up in front of the mansion, a sense of nervous anticipation spread throughout the staff members lined up to greet him.

His reception was nothing out of the ordinary. He was politely greeted by all the staff, as well as his joyful grandmother and smiling mother.

Out of habit, as he passed by the gardener, he looked down at the ground. Next to the large boots, the gardener was wearing, there was a small pair of feet in simple brown shoes. Layla Llewellyn was always by Bill Remmer's side. He knew this would no longer be the case after this summer, however.

He passed by the gardener without turning his head. He was looking forward, in the direction of the staircase at the far end of the mansion's main hall.

“I see your bird has returned with you as well,” Elise von Herhardt remarked with a laugh as she saw a servant holding the golden birdcage that housed the canary that her son had taken with him when he had left Arvis the previous summer. “How strange. You never wanted a puppy or any other pet as a child, and now you cherish that bird so much.”

“If you're interested in birds now, why don't we expand the greenhouse and bring in some more different types of birds?” Dowager Herhardt suggested, smiling.

“That won't be necessary, Grandmother,” Matthias replied, smiling back at her. “One is enough for me.” After this dry response, he walked into the mansion. Before ascending the staircase, he looked up at the grand chandelier, and at the Herhardt family crest imprinted on the ceiling. He had been born underneath that crest, he was living underneath that crest, and one day he would draw his last breath underneath that crest. This fact felt entirely natural to him. He lowered his gaze again and walked up the stairs.

* * *

“If he was going to end his service this year, why did he say before that he was going to extend it for another year?” Countess Brandt grumbled, barely trying to hide her irritation.

She had only suggested that they postpone the wedding by a year out of respect for Duke Herhardt's decision to continue his military service. If she had known how things were actually going to turn out, she would have seen to it that the wedding happened before the end of the summer.

“I didn't realize that Matthias was so capricious.”

“Even though the wedding has been postponed, it's still nice that he's returning to Arvis early, Mother,” Claudine replied, not looking disappointed in the least.

“You certainly seem relaxed about the whole thing. Meanwhile, I can't help but feel upset that my daughter's wedding won't be happening this year.”

“Why are you upset? Rather than having a rushed, slapdash ceremony, won't it be better to hold one later on, so that we can have enough time to prepare everything just right?”

“A year is a long time, Claudine. Don't you realize all that can happen in that time?”

“I don't know, Mother. Think back on the last year. It went by in a flash, and nothing much happened. This next year will just be a repeat of that. And anyway, with Duke Herhardt living at Arvis full-time, the wedding preparations will go even more smoothly.”

“Claudine, men cannot be trusted. And unlike a marriage, an engagement is not a binding agreement.”

“We're not talking about just any man, Mother. We're talking about Matthias von Herhardt.” Claudine was calmly smiling now. “He will never love anyone other than himself.”

Claudine might have been feeling just as uneasy as her mother was if she hadn't heard the news that Layla and the doctor's son were going to be married. With Layla Llewellyn out of the picture, she saw no need for the excessive concern her mother was displaying.

“For him, this engagement is also a matter of family pride. There's nothing that can get in the way of that,” she said decisively as she threaded the needle through her embroidery frame.

Kind yet coldhearted, this was how Matthias had behaved ever since he was a child. While Claudine's other cousins had played pranks on her and called her names, Matthias had always been polite and kind to her. This had been nice, but it had also made him seem more distant and difficult to relate to.

Sometimes she wondered if he even had emotions at all. She found it hard to picture him angry, sad, happy, or worried. It seemed more likely that he would look upon the world with the same graceful yet arrogant smile till the day he died. And this was exactly what she wanted out of him.

“I should visit Arvis next week,” she said, standing up from the sofa feeling refreshed. “I can see Duke Herhardt, and I can congratulate my friend on her upcoming marriage. Two birds with one stone.”

“A friend with an upcoming wedding? Oh no, you mean that orphan girl the gardener is taking care of? Are you really calling her your friend?” Countess Brandt asked, looking aghast.

Claudine flashed a carefree smile. “Layla *is* my friend. My old friend. I should get a wedding gift for her.”

* * *

After lengthy deliberation, Layla put on the white dress she had purchased for her trip to take the exam in Ratse. She neatly braided her hair, then tied it with her favorite ribbon.

She had been to the Ettmans' home before, but she felt even more nervous than she had felt the first time, both because she and Kyle were now engaged, and because his mother had extended the invitation to her this time.

“How do I look, Uncle Bill?” she asked, walking out of her room.

Lazily smoking a cigarette as he sat on the sill of an open window, he chuckled as he looked at her. “With marriage ahead of you, I see that you're more interested in dressing fancy than you ever were before.”

“It's not that, Uncle. I'm just nervous about seeing Mrs. Ettman.”

“You've got nothing to be nervous about. Haven't you already met her a few times before?”

“Sure, but tonight is special.”

“Well you look flawless, so don't worry.”

Stubbing out his cigarette, he stood up and smiled warmly at her. “Just be yourself, Layla. That's enough.” He patted her on the shoulder, and his hand felt just as warm as his smile.

While she knew his assessment was biased since he loved her so much, she smiled back at him and nodded. Only after calming down thanks to his words did she realize how anxious she had been all day. Just then, Kyle arrived.

“Kyle, how do I-”

“You look perfect,” he confidently replied, not even letting her finish the question. “You look like yourself, and that's enough.” He was warmly smiling, just like Bill. “That's all I ever want from you, Layla.”

“Hmm... another guy was just telling me the same thing...” she

replied, giggling as she observed the similarities between Kyle and Bill's facial expressions and remarks.

“What? Who? What guy were you talking to?” Kyle asked.

“Stop with the nonsense and get going, you loafer,” Bill said, slapping Kyle's back.

Kyle stumbled a bit from the unexpected blow, then looked back at Bill with a frown. “But Mr. Remmer, some jerk has been talking to Layl-”

“I'm that jerk, you dummy!”

“So I just think... wait, what?”

“You ill-mannered loafer, I'm going to have to seriously consider whether it's a good idea to let you have Layla after all.” Despite his threateningly blunt words, Bill was patting Kyle's shoulder very gently and warmly.

Layla watched from a few steps back as the two men squabbled.

Those two men were the two people she loved most in the whole world. The two most precious people to her. The two people she never wanted to lose. A smile slowly formed on her face and joy suffused her heart. Uncle Bill and Kyle always had that effect on her. She couldn't imagine life without them.

This was why she had finally decided to marry Kyle, after hesitating for so long. With each day that he had proposed to her and she had rejected him, things had grown more awkward between them. If she couldn't accept his love, then it was only right for a distance to form between them. He had tried as hard as he could to close that gap, but since he had already proposed to her, there were only two options remaining to them; get married or stop seeing each other entirely.

Her wish for them to remain good friends, while becoming no more than that, had become impossible the moment he had first proposed to her. Deep down she had known this, and it had pained her throughout the previous autumn, winter, and spring.

Marriage, and all the rest of the future life that Kyle had talked to her about, had seemed like a vague, far-off notion to her. She didn't

like the idea of excessive desire either. But if marriage was the only way she could avoid losing Kyle, she thought she could find the courage for it.

She had made this resolution in the late spring, the same day that Duke Herhardt had insulted her and made her cry. Not wanting to hold onto anything he had given her, she had thrown all his gold coins into the fountain. The moment she had looked into Kyle's eyes after he came looking for her, she had made up her mind.

The look in his eyes had made her forget all her pain and sorrow. It reminded her of the cozy light of the cottage. So many times, walking down the dark forest path at night, she had seen the warm light of the cottage and had felt deep reassurance knowing that Bill was there waiting for her, ready to comfort her from whatever pain or sadness the world had inflicted on her. That evening by the fountain, Kyle's eyes had given her the same warm, cozy feeling.

As always, Kyle and Bill's meaningless squabble ended with both of them laughing heartily. Still chuckling, Kyle turned and extended his hand towards her. “Let's go, Layla.”

Hesitating slightly, she lightly grasped the tip of his fingers. He chuckled and regripped her hand fully. Her tiny hand was practically swallowed up by his.

While she still wasn't used to these new displays of affection that had started after she had accepted his proposal, she didn't shake off his hand. She didn't want to lose him.

# Chapter 32:
## Happy Days

Mrs. Ettman welcomed her guest with a table packed with delicious-looking dishes and beautiful decorations. Not only Layla, but even Dr. Ettman and Kyle were amazed by the warm reception.

“Thank you for inviting me, Mrs. Ettman,” Layla said. As she recited this greeting, which she had practiced dozens of times throughout the day, she offered Mrs. Ettman the gifts she had brought; a bouquet of fresh roses, and an ornate jar filled with pickled peaches.

“Why thank you,” Mrs. Ettman said, accepting the gifts.

Layla smiled, feeling relieved that this first step had gone well. Seeing the smile on her face, Kyle allowed a smile to break through his serious demeanor. When Mrs. Ettman noticed that her son was smiling, her face went cold momentarily, before returning to an expression of warm hospitality.

Dr. Ettman had said that he would allow Kyle and Layla to marry if they both passed the college entrance examination. There was no doubt that Kyle would pass, and very little doubt that Layla would as well, so their marriage seemed as good as approved already.

*I can't believe that my son is going to marry a girl like that,* Mrs. Ettman thought, clenching her fists under the table. She wasn't happy with the situation, but she had decided to stop resisting. She knew her husband and son well enough to realize that too much resistance could backfire. She took a deep breath to regain her composure, then looked at Layla with even more geniality and said, “I hope you enjoy your meal, Layla. I made sure to include lots of dishes that you like.”

Layla, who had been staring at the full table in amazement, smiled when she heard that the food had been planned with her in mind.

Looking at Layla's pretty face, Mrs. Ettman started to feel a

strange resentment bubbling up inside of her. You used that pretty smile to seduce my Son, didn't you? Realizing with a chill the extreme to which her negative thoughts had reached, she quickly lifted her water glass to her lips. The water felt extremely cold going down her throat.

“Thank you so much,” Layla said with utter sincerity before flashing another polite smile.

She was a kind, well-behaved girl. Mrs. Ettman was well aware of this fact, and it had become yet another reason why she didn't look forward to having her as a daughter-in-law.

She would have greatly preferred it if there were some substantial problem with her, some excuse to dislike or even hate her. Then at least she wouldn't feel so much shame for disliking her in spite of all her virtues.

In fact, she disliked Layla *for* her virtues. She hated that she was so nice, she hated that she was so smart, and she hated that she came from such pitiful circumstances.

Noticing that the smile was fading from his wife's face, Dr. Ettman decided to change the subject. “Layla, there's a professor at Ratse University named Dr. Lorenz who's an expert in avian biology. Make sure to sign up for a class with him when the school year starts. I think it could be quite beneficial for you to study under a great scholar like him.”

“Darling, you're talking as though Layla had already been admitted to the university,” Mrs. Ettman suddenly interjected.

Dr. Ettman and Kyle looked at her with puzzled expressions.

“There's no way she won't be admitted,” Dr. Ettman replied.

“Exactly, Mom. Layla definitely passed the test.”

The father and son resembled each other strikingly, not only in their voices and facial expressions, but also in the care they were showing for Layla. Mrs. Ettman had to stop herself from delivering the harsh retort that she wanted to. Instead, she once again smiled tenderly and replied, “Oh, I see. That makes sense since I know Layla is such a smart girl.”

Layla, sitting across the table from Mrs. Ettman, smiled bashfully at the compliment.

When it came to Layla's early life in Lovita, Bill never told anyone anything. Other residents of Arvis knew only that as a young girl she had lost her parents and been passed around between relatives in Lovita, before finally being sent to Berg.

Linda Ettman hated this about her more than anything, the fact that she had no proper relatives to raise her and care for her, and the fact that she was kicked out of home after home, before finally being sent to a foreign country. She almost shuddered when she thought of what a bad foundation that would be for her when starting a new family with Kyle.

*It's not like I'm asking for much,* Mrs. Ettman thought.

If Layla had simply come from an ordinary family, Mrs. Ettman wouldn't have been so vehemently opposed to her marrying her son. But given Layla's lack of a stable family growing up, she worried that she would be unable to become a good wife or mother. She also looked down on what she saw as Layla's greedy desire to go to college. The way Mrs. Ettman saw it, if Layla wanted this, despite being both female and poor, then she was likely greedy in all sorts of other ways. She thus highly doubted that her son could be happy with her as his wife.

*I've got to stop it,* Mrs. Ettman thought, clasping her hands together under the table. *I've got to stop this marriage from happening, no matter what it takes.*

* * *

Layla's college acceptance letter was delivered by the very same mailman who had delivered Layla herself to Arvis several years earlier. Layla was out on a walk when the letter arrived, so Bill received it on her behalf. As soon as he saw the envelope, he went silent and started staring into space.

“Mr. Remmer?” the mailman said, looking at Bill with concern after he made no response to his words of congratulation. Bill's

carefree expression was gone, and now his face was starting to flush. “Are you all right, Mr. Remmer?”

“Oh... yes. Nothing to worry about,” Bill replied, rubbing his eyes with his big hand. “I was just lost in thought for a moment,” he added in a louder voice. His eyes were moist with tears.

The mailman was already aware of how tenderhearted Bill was beneath his gruff exterior, so he pretended not to notice the tears. Nodding, he said, “Well anyway, congratulations, truly. I'm so happy to hear that Layla will be attending the empire's most prestigious university.” With those additional words of congratulation, he left.

Bill returned to the porch, holding the precious letter of acceptance. Sitting in his chair, he read the letter from start to finish a few more times, then caressed it with his fingers. The excited flush gradually left his face after he took a few deep breaths.

Just then, Layla returned. “Uncle Bill!” she shouted, waving and running towards him as soon as she saw him. The old leather bag on her shoulder bounced wildly as she ran.

“That stupid bag,” Bill muttered, chuckling to himself.

It was an old tool bag that he had given her the summer she had first come to Arvis. Even after acquiring a few other, nicer bags, when going out into the forest she always grabbed that worn-out old thing.

“When are you planning on throwing away that piece of junk?” he grumbled at her as she sat down next to him.

“Throw it away?! It still works for me just fine,” she replied.

“Please, just throw it away. Put it out of its misery already.”

“It's still got some kick in it. I'm going to keep using it a little longer.” She smiled as she ran her fingers along the bag's tattered strap. “I'm going to miss it when it's gone.”

Rather than telling her how silly she sounded, he decided to stop talking about the bag, and instead held out the acceptance letter in front of her face.

“What's this, Uncle Bill?”

“Read it and find out.”

She gave him a surprised glance, then took the letter. Rather than bursting into ecstatic celebration as he had expected her to, as she read the letter she seemed to grow calmer and more relaxed.

Eventually, he grew concerned enough by her unusually calm reaction that he called to her. “Layla...?”

Only then did she lift her head and look at him. She had a reserved smile on her face.

*It would be nice if you acted a bit more like a young lady at times like this,* Bill thought, scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment over the fact that she had reacted to the news in a more adultlike manner than he had.

Watching his reaction, she started smiling even more brightly. Before he even had time to acknowledge her smile, she had wrapped her arms around him joyfully.

“No need to overreact,” he said. Despite his indifferent words, however, he lovingly patted her on the back.

After a while, she looked up at him and whispered, “Thank you.” Her eyes were welling up with tears. “Thank you so much, Uncle Bill.” She smiled brightly at him. “It's all thanks to you, Uncle Bill.”

“That's ridiculous,” he replied. Taking a deep breath, he tried to distract himself by mentally counting up all the tasks he had to finish before sundown. Even so, his eyes felt like they were ready to burst into tears again. *Why is she so good at making me cry?* “You're the one who studied, you're the one who did so well on the exam. What did I do?”

“No. No, Uncle Bill.” Shaking her head vigorously, she grabbed his hand, barely able to fit both her hands around one of his. “I...” Her hands felt soft and warm as they gripped his. “If it weren't for you, Uncle Bill, I would have...”

On this wonderful day, she looked like she was about to start sobbing. This frightened Bill more than anything. He didn't like seeing her shedding tears, even if they were tears of joy.

He only ever wanted to see a cheerful smile on her face. All the love and care he had put into all the flowers and trees he had cultivated throughout his whole life, didn't equal the love he felt for this girl. There was no flower or tree that he cherished more than her.

He wasn't sure when it had gotten that way. One day he had simply realized that it was true.

Clearing his throat to calm his emotions, he said, “Let's go to the capital next weekend, what do you say?”

“You and me, to Ratse?” she asked, looking surprised.

“Now that you've been admitted to the university, you've got to pay the tuition and enroll in classes, right? While we're there, we can do some sightseeing. It'll be nice. After all, I've never taken you anywhere before.”

“Are you serious?” she asked. Her tear-filled eyes were glistening with anticipation. “You and I are going on a trip? Really?”

“It won't be a fancy trip or anything. Mainly we're just going to pay the tuition.”

“Even so.”

As he saw how excited she was about the trip, he felt regret. It was then that Chef Mona's words about him not knowing how to take care of a daughter hit home. He wondered why he had never taken her on any sort of trip, even a short trip somewhere close where she could see some sights and he could buy her some good food to eat. He wondered why this thought was only now occurring to him, when she would be moving away so soon.

“The tuition is a lot of money, and anyway I'm not comfortable sending you and Kyle off together without a chaperone again, even if you're going to get married. So I have no choice but to bring you myself...” He continued to mutter excuses until he felt embarrassed and laughed at himself.

Layla hugged him again.

“Hey, Layla, I was right, wasn't I?” he said, softly patting her head with a delighted smile on his face. “Didn't I say you would

become an outstanding adult?" Although this comment failed to fully convey his emotions, he gave up on trying to find more words and quietly continued patting her head. To prevent himself from being overcome by sobs, he started mentally counting up his tasks once again.

# Chapter 33:
## Arvis's Heaven

Word spread quickly through Arvis that Layla, the girl that Bill Remmer was raising, had gotten into Ratse University.

Simultaneously, the word was spreading that Dr. Ettman's only son had been admitted into the same university's medical school after passing the entrance exam with flying colors, but this news didn't generate as much buzz, since everyone had already expected it to happen.

Layla's news was a different story, however. For several days, whenever two or more people met, Layla Llewellyn would inevitably become a topic of their conversation. This was even true of conversations that went on in the duke's greenhouse.

"To think, a common orphan, and a female one at that, going to college. Bill Remmer must have done an amazing job raising her," said Dowager Herhardt. Normally she wouldn't participate in gossiping about a lowly child, but today she was displaying just as much interest in Layla as anyone.

"She must have been born lucky. First, she met her savior, Bill, and then she managed to get engaged to Dr. Ettman's son," Elise von Herhardt added.

Claudine, who had been quietly sipping her tea, politely smiled and nodded. "I'm so happy that poor girl has had such good luck." She felt more capable than ever of sincerely praising Layla.

Just then, a maid that Dowager Herhardt had instructed to go to the cottage returned, accompanied by Layla, who was very neatly dressed.

"Come here and have a seat," Dowager Herhardt calmly said.

Layla's eyes were wide with surprise, as were those of Lady Herhardt and Claudine.

"There's nothing wrong with offering a cup of tea to a special girl, is there?" Dowager Herhardt asked, smiling. While all the

Herhardts were aloof, blue-blooded aristocrats, Katharina von Herhardt was especially so. Thus, it came as a shock to everyone that she would invite an orphan girl raised by a gardener to tea.

With a nervous look on her face, Layla sat in the seat that the maid guided her to.

As soon as Layla's tea had been served, Dowager Herhardt began. “So, I heard that you have been admitted into a university that even sons from the most distinguished families have trouble getting into.”

“It's all thanks to Uncle Bill,” Layla replied, her eyes lowered politely.

“Of course. We mustn't forget your savior, Bill Remmer.”

“Indeed, Ma'am.”

“I hear you're from Lovita.”

“Yes, Ma'am. My Mother was from Lovita, but my Father was from Berg.”

“You and I are alike in that respect.”

Elise and Claudine reacted with shock at this casual comment.

Dowager Herhardt's father had been a prestigious marquess who was related to the Berg imperial family, while her mother came from the Lovita royal family's bloodline. It was astounding that she was comparing her lineage to that of a poor orphan girl.

“Tell me something that you would like to receive,” Dowager Herhardt said, setting down her teacup.

Layla was taken aback by this sudden command.

“Bill Remmer is one of my favorite employees. You're like a daughter to him, so I would like to give you a congratulatory gift,” Dowager Herhardt calmly said.

Out of surprise, Layla forgot her manners and stared straight at Dowager Herhardt. Meanwhile, two more people entered the greenhouse. “Duke Herhardt!” Claudine exclaimed with delight.

Everyone looked in the direction of Claudine's gaze, including Layla.

Matthias von Herhardt was standing by the table. He made eye

contact with Layla, whereupon they both frowned for different reasons. There was a slight feeling of tension in the room, until Layla removed it by averting her eyes.

“This girl has been admitted into Ratse University. We wanted to congratulate her, so we invited her to have a cup of tea with us,” Elise von Herhardt said, smiling as she explained the unusual situation.

Matthias nodded and sat down next to Claudine, in a seat that just happened to be right across from Layla's.

“You're back early,” Claudine said to her fiancé, smiling at him tenderly.

Now that he had taken full charge of the family's business, Matthias usually left the mansion early in the morning and didn’t return until late at night. It had already been a week since Claudine had arrived for her visit to Arvis, but this was the first time she had seen him return home while it was still light out.

“The meeting ended earlier than expected, My Lady,” he replied.

“That's good to hear. I've been worried that you've been overworking yourself lately.”

“Claudine is right, Matthias,” Elise von Herhardt remarked. “You shouldn't overdo things when it comes to work, or it could have an impact on your health.”

The conversation at the tea table then turned to Matthias's situation and the family business. In an instant, it was as if Layla was no longer there.

Thanks to this, she was able to catch her breath and take a sip of her tea, which by now was lukewarm. She wanted nothing more than to escape this uncomfortable situation, but she couldn't leave without first being excused, especially with the duke's mother and grandmother there.

She set her cup down on the saucer, trying not to make a sound as she did so. Then she absentmindedly looked up, and was so startled by what she saw, she flinched and pushed her body into the back of her chair. Matthias, sitting between his fiancée and his

mother while they chatted, was looking straight at her. His cold eyes looked exactly the same as they had looked the day he had trampled on her heart.

Rather than reaching for her cup again, she hurriedly put her hands under the table. Matthias's gaze then turned to Claudine as she began to speak with him. When Claudine started speaking with Elise again, his gaze returned to Layla.

Layla quickly lowered her head, but she could still feel his burdensome gaze on her. Soon, memories from the previous summer began to flood into her mind. Recalling those memories while in Claudine's presence made her feel even worse. A chill went down her spine. Matthias was the one who had committed the wrongdoings, but Layla was the one who felt guilty.

“So, have you thought of something you would like to receive?” Dowager Herhardt asked. With this question, the table's attention returned to Layla.

Layla reflexively lifted her head upon hearing her name, then unwittingly started biting her lip. This was because Matthias's blue eyes were still fixed on her. Trying to hide her anxiety, she quickly turned to face Dowager Herhardt and replied, “You have already given me a huge gift, Ma'am. I don't need anything more.”

“You already received a gift?”

“Yes. Simply by allowing me to stay at Uncle Bill's cottage here in Arvis, you've done more for me than I'll ever be able to repay you for. It's the biggest, most wonderful gift I've ever received, and I'm eternally grateful for it.”

“All we did was approve Bill's request.”

“Your approval of that request was a gift that changed my whole life, Ma'am.” A slight smile formed on her lips. “My deepest thanks to you as well, Lady Herhardt,” she said, turning to Elise. “And also to you, Your Grace, and you, Miss Claudine.” Since the only thing she really wanted at that moment was to be allowed to leave, which was a request she knew she couldn't make, she instead expressed her thanks to all these people that she didn't particularly care for.

“I'll never forget the kindness you've extended to me, even after I depart from Arvis.” She then bowed her head deeply, to indicate her polite refusal of any further gift.

Dowager Herhardt looked closely at her for a moment, then nodded. The act of refusing the Herhardt family's generosity was bold, but Layla had expressed this refusal in a highly refined manner, not at all what one would expect from a girl of such lowly upbringing.

“You're already saying your goodbyes? That makes me sad, Layla,” Claudine said. “I understand how you feel, but we would still like to give you a gift. Ah, how about we pay your tuition?”

“No thank you, Miss. I'm happy to accept the kindness you've already shown me as my gift,” Layla replied, still smiling politely. “Uncle Bill has already saved up the money for my tuition. He told me he really wants to pay for my first semester of college.”

“Really? Then we'll have to think of something else. I can't let an old friend leave empty handed, when she's just gotten into college *and* gotten engaged.” Smiling, she turned to Matthias. “Isn't that right, Duke Herhardt?” Her voice was as sweet as honey as she gently pressured him.

He glanced at Layla for a moment, then lightly nodded his head.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries and salutations, Layla was finally free to leave this uncomfortable tea table. As she was walking away from the Herhardts, she was able to take in the interior of the greenhouse.

Everyone who visited it praised it enthusiastically, calling it Arvis's heaven.

Now that Layla was able to look around the lavish greenhouse, she felt uneasy. Seeing all the beautiful birds with clipped wings, and all the excessively colorful and fragrant flowers, she started to feel overwhelmed. This feeling was heightened by the sound of the water flowing in the marble fountain, and by the sunlight that was intensified as it shone through the glass walls.

She left the greenhouse immediately, not looking back once. Only

once she was outside, in the gentle embrace of the breeze and the natural sunlight, was she able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Her long evening shadow followed her as she walked back towards the woods.

* * *

“Linda, do you know what you're saying right now?” Daniel Raynor asked in disbelief. The rays of the setting sun flowing in through the uncurtained window made him squint as he sat across from his cousin, Linda Ettman. “Linda!”

“Lower your voice, Daniel,” she said. Her face remained amazingly calm as she glanced at the closed door.

Daniel let out a distressed moan. After a failed investment in an overseas mining venture had caused his financial situation to go downhill quickly, he had gone several times to ask for help from his richest relative, his cousin Linda Ettman. Each time he had asked, she had given him a cold yet graceful rejection. But much to his surprise, this time she had come to see him and offer to help him willingly.

Of course, he hadn't expected the help to come for free. But when he heard what she wanted him to do in exchange, it made him hesitate, despite the dire straits he was in. “That's stealing, Linda. How could I-”

“No,” Mrs. Ettman said, cutting him off. She slowly closed and opened her eyes, then said, “It's just briefly hiding something and then putting it back.”

“But...”

“Don't you care about Kyle?”

“Of course I do.”

“And you need my help, don't you?” She lifted her hands from her lap and rubbed her temples.

Daniel's face started to flush, but he stopped trying to argue, just as she knew he would.

“You'll take the money, and then when the time comes, you'll put

it back. That's it. By doing that simple favor for me, you'll be able to protect your family, and I'll be able to protect my son."
Straightening her posture, she looked into his eyes. "Sounds like a pretty good deal to me. What do you think, Daniel?"

# Chapter 34:
## An Excuse to Break Her Heart

When Kyle saw Layla coming down the forest path towards him, a smile as warm as the sunset spread across his face. “Layla!”

She had been looking at her feet as she walked, but when she heard him shouting her name, she looked up at once. Her eyes widened when she saw him. He felt boundless love for her when he saw her increase her pace while smiling at him.

“When did you get here?” she asked.

“A little while ago. I went to the cottage, and Bill said that you'd been summoned to go to the mansion, so I thought I'd come rescue you.”

“Rescue me?”

“It's obvious why Lady Claudine summoned you, isn't it?”

“It wasn't that today.” She smiled as she started walking again.

Matching her pace, he started walking alongside her.

“And it wasn't Lady Claudine who summoned me. It was Dowager Herhardt.”

“Dowager Herhardt? She summoned you?”

“Yeah. She congratulated me on getting into college, and asked if there was any gift I wanted.”

“What did you say?”

“That I didn't want anything, that I was just grateful that they had let me stay here.”

“That's a very Layla-like response,” he replied, chuckling at her predictable reply.

He furtively reached over to hold her hand. Unlike before, she didn't seem nervous about accepting his hand in hers. This small shift in her behavior made him feel very happy.

They walked hand in hand down the familiar path, chatting about the usual things; what they were up to that day, the new installment of the newspaper's mystery novel, and their plans for

the summer.

Soon dusk fell. The forest quickly grew dark, and Kyle drew on the darkness to muster more courage.

Squeezing her hand, he yanked on her arm. She lost her balance for a moment, then stabled herself by resting her back against the trunk of a large tree on the side of the path. He stood facing her. The whole maneuver happened in a flash, but to him, it felt like an eternity.

“Kyle?” she said in a faint, shaky voice. The scarlet color of her lips was visible even in the dusk.

He shut his eyes tightly and, gathering all his courage, leaned towards her. Right away he could feel her warm skin against his lips. But strangely, the sensation was different from what he had expected.

He opened his eyes, and burst into laughter at what he saw. He had just kissed the back of her hand. She was looking at him with her hand held firmly over her mouth, blushing.

“This kind of thing feels strange to me, Kyle,” she mumbled. “If we do this kind of thing, it feels like we're doing something bad, and I don't...” Trailing off, she lowered her eyes. Her long, blonde eyelashes pointed downward.

*You don't think what you're doing is even worse?* he wanted to ask her, but he restrained himself, clearing his throat instead. His cheeks were just as red as hers. “Miss Llewellyn, if you don't know how to kiss, what do you know?”

“Huh?”

“On the train, you were acting like you were an expert on everything.”

“What does that... ah.” After a moment, she recalled their conversation in which he had said he would jump off the moving train if she kept talking about reproductive behavior. “Well that's...” She searched for the right words for a moment then gave up and muttered the phrase she always used when she couldn't come up with a retort: “I don't know about that.”

He slumped into a resigned posture and let out a gentle sigh. He thought it was pitiful that he hadn't even kissed the woman he was going to marry, but he wasn't excessively upset about it. More than a kiss, what he really wanted was to win her heart. He wasn't going to let himself get swept up by passion if it was going to hurt her.

He put his hands to her cheeks and gently caressed them, then put his warm lips on her smooth forehead. He resolved not to be too demanding with her when it came to displays of affection.

He took a deep breath in, and the sweet smell of roses filled his lungs. It was Layla's scent.

* * *

After finishing his shower, Matthias sauntered towards the window on the west side of his bedroom. He had an orderly daily routine. No matter when he got to sleep, he generally woke up early in the morning. Soon after waking, he headed to the bathroom for a quick shower, and then he began his day. After repeating this routine so many times, it had become second nature to him. Including what he was doing now.

He gazed out the window at the lush rose garden below. Naturally, Layla was there. She seemed to be following the gardener around more than usual, perhaps because the day of her departure was drawing near. She and the gardener stayed near each other throughout their work, chatting all the while.

He had once thought of her as a girl of extremely few words. When she was around him or Claudine, she generally kept her lips tightly shut.

When the scheduled time rolled around, he heard a familiar knock at his door.

“Your Grace, it's me, Hessen.”

“Come in,” he replied, standing with his back to the still-open window.

A breeze caused the thin curtains to sway.

While Hessen briefed him on the day's schedule, Matthias read

the newspaper he had brought. There was nothing scheduled until lunch.

“I must admit, Your Grace, Arvis felt a bit empty until you returned,” Hessen remarked, instead of staying silent like usual.

Matthias set down his teacup and looked at him. “Grandmother and Mother would be sorry to hear you say that.”

“Pardon? Ah, no, Your Grace. That's not what I meant. It's just that-”

“I know,” Matthias said. “I know what you were getting at.” A brief smile flashed across his face. Even after the smile was gone, he continued looking at his middle-aged butler with a gaze as calm as still water.

Relieved that his master was not upset, Hessen soon left.

Even after the door to his room was shut, Matthias remained leaning against the window frame, reading the newspaper. The sunlight shone upon his eyes, making them appear paler than usual through the hair that hung loosely over his forehead.

He put down the newspaper after perusing an article about a company owned by Count Klein, the man with whom he would be having lunch. He slowly turned around and saw Layla, who was now at a flowerbed quite close to the mansion. Underneath her straw hat, which he recalled had barely been rescued from the river, her braided hair swung as she moved.

The gardener said something, and she excitedly said something in response. She was laughing. He could tell this even though her face was obscured by the shadow of her hat. She was laughing loudly.

He narrowed his eyes and slowly ran his fingers through his hair. *Maybe I shouldn't have come back...* he thought. He had felt this the moment he first set foot on the estate.

His life had been meticulously planned. It was like there was a staircase leading to the perfect life, and all he had to do was slowly ascend it.

But now he had reached a warped step. He still couldn't understand why he had made that choice, which had gone against

his life plan.

Or perhaps his first misstep had happened earlier than the night when he had torn the military extension request form in half. Perhaps it was the day he had postponed his wedding, saying that he wanted to extend his military service period by a year, when he had been blinded by desire. Perhaps it was the day he had approached her after she fell from her bicycle. Perhaps it was some earlier day that he didn't even remember.

He still desired her. He was well aware of that. Therefore, he wanted her to disappear. He was well aware of that too.

This confusing situation had created a rift between his heated emotions and his ardent desire. He wasn't sure of the solution, but he trusted that time would resolve things.

He closed the window and got dressed. As he strode down the corridor, his face was alternately obscured and illuminated by shadows and light from the windows.

Leaving his attendants behind, he exited the mansion alone and took to the forest path leading to the river. The shadows in the woods seemed especially dark because the sun was shining so brightly.

He stopped and stood amid those shadows for a moment, musing.

He had never previously experienced desire, so he didn't understand the longing that he was experiencing now. Suddenly, he realized that there was an even stranger feeling; the feeling of being unable to have what he desired.

* * *

The closer Daniel Raynor got to the gardener's cottage, the paler his face grew with trepidation. It wasn't yet the hottest point in the day, but his forehead was damp with sweat. “This is crazy,” he muttered to himself as he caught his first glimpse of the cottage's roof in the distance.

Mrs. Ettman had told him she wanted Daniel to take the college tuition money the gardener had saved up, and hold on to it for a

while. In plain words, she wanted him to steal the money.

The graceful, high-minded Linda Ettman had persuaded her cousin to commit theft, out of a desire to separate her son from that poor girl.

When he had reached the cottage's front yard, Daniel pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. His other hand was tightly gripping a briefcase.

He also felt sorry for Kyle, who had fallen in love with and decided to marry a girl who wasn't a good fit for him. Everyone had expected that the Ettmans' daughter-in-law would come from at least a low-ranking aristocratic family.

But Kyle sincerely wanted to marry Layla, and Dr. Ettman was in support of his choice, feeling that she was a decent person, despite her lowly social status. Mrs. Ettman had agreed on this point. Who could have known the dagger hidden behind her gentle smile?

"Money is the enemy," Daniel muttered.

Pulling himself out of his low spirits, he strode towards the cottage. Linda had told him that it would be empty during the morning hours. If by some chance Layla was there, he was to tell her that he had just been visiting the Ettmans and was stopping by to congratulate her on getting into college. He and Layla had met before, so it was a plausible excuse.

As he approached the front door, he started to hope that she *was* home, so that he could abandon the whole plan. He knocked and waited, but there was no sound from within the cottage.

Abandoning himself to despair, he tried the knob. Just as his cousin had promised, it was unlocked.

*"But Linda, even if the tuition money is stolen, someone else could step forward and offer to cover the expense. Even your husband said he was willing to pay her tuition,"* he had said to her.

Smiling bitterly in response, she had replied, *"Trust me, I know my husband better than you, Daniel."*

*"But why..."*

*"The missing tuition money is just an excuse."*

*“Huh?”*

*“An excuse to break that girl's heart,”* Linda had replied with a sigh.

Daniel had asked no further questions. If this was his last hope, he didn't want to know any more details, since they would likely only make him feel even more guilty and ashamed.

*I'm just helping my cousin borrow the gardener's money.* He kept repeating this rationalization in his mind as he entered the cottage.

It didn't take him very long to finish. As he stepped out of the cottage, money-filled briefcase in hand, he felt a sense of relief. His part in this scheme was now done. All that was left was for him to deliver the money to Linda, receive his fee, which would save his house from foreclosure, and go home.

To avoid running into the gardener, he chose a circuitous route, walking alongside the river. However, this cautious decision plunged him into an even worse predicament. He realized this after seeing a young man on this same path.

The young man slowly came to a stop after seeing Daniel. Not seeming particularly startled or alarmed, he simply stared at him.

*Is he a servant from Arvis?* Daniel wondered, feeling some relief. This relief was short-lived, however. Soon he started to feel deep dread as it occurred to him that there was no way that a servant would be out for a leisurely stroll by the river during the busy morning hours. His attire didn't look like that of a servant either. And moreover, his face looked very familiar.

Then it hit him, he had seen that face countless times in the newspaper, and had even seen him in person a few times from a distance. It was Duke Herhardt.

# Chapter 35:
## What the Thief Stole

Once again, Layla Llewellyn's name was on the lips of all the Arvis staff members for several days, but this time for a very different reason. Now it was because the gardener's cottage had been burglarized.

News of this spread throughout the mansion in a flash. Upon first hearing about it, most people doubted that any thief would have dared enter the Herhardt estate, but their doubt was dispelled when they saw the half-crazed Bill Remmer wandering about, looking for the thief.

Matthias left the mansion when the commotion about the burglary was reaching its height. He had to depart then so that he wouldn't be late for his lunch.

As his car left the mansion's tree-lined driveway, he began to sense that whatever was going on wasn't a matter of trivial gossip. There were policemen on horseback approaching from across the road. Since the road came to a dead end at Arvis, there was no need to guess where they were headed.

“I'm told that a thief broke into the gardener's home,” his assistant said, anticipating his question.

“Bill Remmer's home?”

“Yes. It seems that the money he had saved up for his child's college tuition disappeared, which is the reason for the uproar.”

*A thief. Tuition. Layla.* Matthias tilted his head as he recited these words in his mind with fascination. Just as the car was leaving the shade of Platanus Road, he remembered the stranger he had encountered that morning while walking next to the Schulter River.

The man had introduced himself, saying that his name was Daniel Raynor and that he was the cousin of Dr. Ettman's wife. He had explained that he was in town visiting the Ettmans, and had stopped by the Arvis estate to congratulate Layla on getting into

college. He had gone on to say various things about the small investment company he ran, international mining rights, the stock market, and other things, but Matthias had mostly stopped listening at this point so he didn't remember much of what he had said.

What he did remember was the time. While the middle-aged man was prattling on with sweat pouring down his forehead, Matthias had glanced at the man's wristwatch, and noticed that it was not even nine o'clock yet. It was an unusually early time of day for a refined middle-class businessman to be visiting his cousin's son's fiancée to congratulate her on getting into college.

However, since the matter didn't concern him, he had let it go, and hadn't thought anything more of it, until he heard the remarkable news that a thief had broken into the gardener's cottage.

*But why?*

Whatever sort of financial trouble the man might have been in, the thought that he would have sneaked into an unfamiliar place like Arvis and stolen the money of the gardener of all people sounded ridiculous. Why wouldn't he have simply stolen from his wealthy cousin's house?

Just as he was ready to stop thinking about the strange scenario, he found himself muttering, “Linda Ettman.”

Linda Ettman was the missing link that made the connection between Layla and that man more plausible. It was still just conjecture, but with her in the picture, the pieces seemed to fit together much better, and this intrigued him.

The car came to a stop in front of the hotel where the lunch was being held. Before getting out, he instructed his assistant, “Find out whatever you can about Daniel Raynor. As quickly as possible.”

* * *

The food on the dinner table was almost completely untouched. Bill and Kyle normally had great appetites, but not tonight. Of course, Layla knew the reason for this, and eventually, she got up

and started quietly clearing the table. With his plate still more than half-full, Bill got up, went to the porch, and lit a cigarette.

Since the burglary, the atmosphere in the cottage had been gloomy and morose.

“It's all right, Layla,” Kyle said as he helped her clear the table.

Her busy hands stopped for a moment and she looked up at him with her green eyes.

“I'm sure they'll catch the thief,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“And even if not, you don't need to worry about tuition. My dad wanted me to tell you that he'll cover it.”

“Kyle.”

“Don't even think about refusing. He wanted to cover your tuition from the start. He only gave in after Bill kept insisting on paying for it himself.” Kyle was speaking more assertively than normal. “We're getting married, Layla. That means we're family. You don't need to worry about being indebted to my dad. Family members help each other out, it's the most natural thing in the world. Right?”

With her eyes lowered, she stood motionless for a short while, then slowly nodded. He looked at her face, which had grown noticeably gaunt in just a few days, and he felt bitter hatred towards the thief who had disturbed the peacefulness of the forest.

“Anyway, for now, let's assume they're going to catch the thief.” He was well aware that the chances of the thief being caught were very low, but he wanted to retain a sense of hope for her sake.

After this comment, she looked at him with a hopeful smile. “Yeah. Thanks, Kyle.”

“Thanks for what? What did I do?”

“Just thanks. Thanks for everything.”

She smiled again, but somehow it only made his heart feel heavier.

He vividly remembered the look of ebullient joy on her face when she had told him that she was going on a trip to the capital with Uncle Bill. The purpose of the trip was to pay her tuition, but

in reality, it was going to be the first vacation they had gone on together. She had been as happy as a child as she went on about it, saying that since it would be her second trip to the capital, she would be able to act as his guide. Kyle had teased her, but he had been just as happy as she was.

She had gushed forth about the places she would go with Uncle Bill, the food she would eat with him, and the things she would do with him. Hearing her talk so excitedly, Kyle had almost started to envy Bill.

However, the thief had spoiled everything. Even if the money were recovered, it seemed impossible that Layla and Bill could enjoy a happy, carefree vacation like they had planned. And Kyle knew there was nothing he could do about this.

He took a deep breath and let it out to shake off his deep feeling of hopelessness, then walked out to the porch and sat next to Bill, who had a sullen look on his face. Bill glanced at him, then lit another cigarette. He had spent the days since the burglary seething inside and coming up with dozens of ways to kill someone. Now, however, his anger had given way to dejection. After a while, he spoke. “It's all my fault.” His voice sounded weak and dispirited. “I was storing all that money at home, without even bothering to lock the door.”

“It's not your fault,” Kyle replied. “Who would ever think a thief would've sneaked into Arvis?”

“Next week is the deadline for tuition, and I'm not sure if that miserable thief will be caught by then.”

“Don't worry about that. If there's no progress in the search by then, my father said that he will cover Layla's tuition. I told Layla already.”

Bill's eyes sank as he looked at Kyle's smiling face.

“My father is going to call the police station tomorrow,” Kyle continued. “He has a friend there, and he's going to ask him to do a thorough investigation into this incident.”

“Thanks, Kyle. I'm so indebted to your family, I feel ashamed.”

“I'm sorry to hear you feel that way. I still don't think I've made up for half the food I've eaten over here.”

Bill chuckled weakly at this remark. “Please give your parents my thanks. No, actually, tell them I'll pay them a visit once this matter is resolved.” He squeezed Kyle's shoulder.

Kyle thought about saying that there was no need to go to the trouble of a visit, but then changed his mind and slowly nodded. He wasn't sure, but he had a feeling that the visit would be more for Bill than for his parents, and he didn't want to disappoint him.

* * *

The duke's mansion housed two separate studies. The one on the second floor was a large, spacious room containing as many books as a public library. The one at the end of the third-floor hallway, next to the master bedroom, was smaller. Filled mostly with books on history, politics, and economics, the third-floor study had been used for generations as a space for the duke to work and receive guests. This was what Matthias used it for as well.

Mark Evers walked towards the third-floor study with hurried steps. Mark had been Matthias's personal assistant since the duke had come of age, but had never previously received an urgent order like the one he had received today.

At first, he had assumed that Matthias was simply easy-going by nature. Eventually, however, he had started to wonder if it was rather that there was nothing in all of the Berg Empire capable of making him anxious. After all, he had everything he could ever want, and his life always proceeded smoothly.

Matthias von Herhardt was a man who knew he was winning at life. Mark was sure that this was the source of his kindness and generosity. It was the mellowness of a predator with a full belly. Perhaps that was why Mark felt like even the air moved more slowly when he was in Matthias's presence. That was the Duke Herhardt he knew.

This was why he had doubted his ears when he heard Matthias

add the phrase “as quickly as possible” onto his order to investigate Daniel Raynor. Once he was sure he had not misheard, he urgently got to work conducting the investigation.

Almost running down the hallway, he reached the third-floor study quickly. “Your Grace, it's me, Mark.”

It was clear from the crack under the door that the light was on the inside, but there was no reply, this meant, *Come in.* He quietly opened the door and entered the study. Matthias was sitting slumped down on a large leather sofa. It was late at night, but he had just concluded a meeting with the directors of the family business and was still dressed formally.

“This is a file on Daniel Raynor, as you requested.” Mark gently placed the folder on the table.

Matthias rubbed his temples, then picked up the folder and began flipping through the pages within. Watching him relaxedly peruse the pages, Mark was relieved to see the Duke Herhardt he was used to.

This relief was short-lived, however. Soon he saw Matthias behaving even more strangely. After carefully reading every page in the file, Matthias burst into a fit of laughter.

Daniel had invested a large sum of money in an overseas mining venture, and had put down his house as collateral when borrowing this money from the bank. The venture had turned out to be a scam, and he had lost all his money and would soon be reduced to living on the street. Thus, Mark had no idea what it was about Daniel's story that could have made the unemotional Duke Herhardt burst into laughter.

“Let me guess, sometime in the last few days, Daniel Raynor miraculously paid off all his bank debts, right?” Matthias asked, holding the folder in his hand. There was a wry smile on his lips. His face appeared gentle when he was showing no emotion, but his coldheartedness showed through when he laughed or grinned.

“Yes, Your Grace. I was about to report that to you. It wasn't the whole amount, but he repaid enough to prevent the bank from

seizing his house. It just happened this afternoon, so I wasn't able to include it in the file."

"And I would guess that the money came from the Ettman family?" He was still smiling. "Specifically, Linda Ettman?" He seemed to relish the sound of her name as he slowly pronounced it.

"How did you-"

"Well done. Summon Hessen for me."

Mark was taken aback, but he asked no more questions and left at once to summon the butler.

# Chapter 36:
## So What?

Hessen entered the study shortly after Matthias's assistant left. “You called for me, Your Grace?”

“What happened with the thief who stole Bill Remmer's money?” Matthias asked. There were still traces of laughter in his voice.

“Police officers have combed the site, but so far they have been unable to find any evidence or eyewitnesses.”

“Then what about Layla Llewellyn's tuition?”

“Dowager Herhardt said that she intends to cover the tuition costs if the thief is not caught, and Lady Claudine said she feels the same way. Dr. Ettman is also willing to cover the costs, as he had been from the start.”

It was the reply Matthias had expected. He nodded, then started chuckling again and looked down at the file.

Linda Ettman was the mastermind behind the theft. He had reached this conclusion on the basis of the information contained in the file on that foolish man he had encountered the morning of the incident. On the surface, Mrs. Ettman had seemed to have accepted her son's choice of marriage partner. But it seemed that she was secretly much more menacing and tenacious than she appeared to be.

Of course, the true nature of her heart was irrelevant to him. What he was interested in was Layla Llewellyn, who knew nothing but acted like she knew everything. *Should I start calling her a fool?*

Interpreting Matthias's silence as opposition, Hessen started to say, “If by chance you feel differently, Your Grace-”

“No,” Matthias said, cutting him off. “I respect my grandmother's wishes. I'm not opposed.”

As he made this response, Matthias felt certain that Linda Ettman had considered these possibilities when planning her scheme.

The pawn that she had hired may have been unimpressive, but

her plan as a whole was careful and systematic. She was certainly aware that there were plenty of people who would step forward to cover the cost of the tuition, including her own husband.

Then what was her real objective? Rubbing his chin, Matthias sank into thought. If Linda knew that taking away the tuition money wouldn't stop Layla and Kyle from going to college together, what was the point of raising such a commotion?

A dark smile spread across Matthias's face. He felt like he was trying to solve a fascinating puzzle.

“Have someone follow Mrs. Ettman,” he told Hessen, crossing his legs. He was no longer laughing, but his voice sounded gentle.

“Mrs. Ettman? You mean the wife of Dr. Ettman, the family doctor?”

“Yes. Linda Ettman. The doctor's wife.”

The highly casual tone of Matthias's reply flustered Hessen even more.

“There's one thing I need reported,” Matthias said, smiling softly as he leaned his tired body into the sofa. “I need to know if Mrs. Ettman ever meets with Layla Llewellyn alone, and if so, I need to know what they talk about.

* * *

The police returned to Arvis the next morning. Rather than going straight to the cottage, this time they went to the mansion first. Coincidentally, Matthias happened to be walking down the main hall's staircase just as they arrived.

“Good morning, Your Grace. I'm sorry to have to inconvenience you by visiting at this hour,” said the gray-haired man leading the group of police officers.

Matthias came to a stop at the center of the hall. Claudine and their attendants stopped a few steps behind him.

Hessen approached Matthias and whispered, “They want to continue their search for eyewitnesses.”

Matthias readily nodded. “Of course. Do whatever you need to

do."

"Thank you, Your Grace," said the officer in front, bowing politely.

Immediately, all the younger officers behind him bowed as well.

As Matthias was about to be on his way, the gray-haired officer approached him and said, "By the way, Your Grace..."

Matthias turned his head and looked at him with a calm face.

After a moment of hesitation, the officer asked, "Did you happen to see any strangers on the estate the morning of the incident?"

Matthias slowly turned his body to face him.

*I sure did,* he thought, but rather than saying that, he simply flashed a graceful smile. He considered the things he could do for Layla. Should he reveal Mrs. Ettman's scheme to block her son's marriage by exploiting her desperate cousin?

As long as Linda had only done this much to Layla, he could still stop the worst from happening. There would likely be an uproar, but it would probably fizzle out quickly. And since Dr. Ettman and his son were so adamant, Matthias was sure that the marriage would end up happening. At that point, Mrs. Ettman would surely give up.

*And then...* Matthias slowly looked up and gazed at the lights in the chandelier. *Then, having gotten a once-in-a-lifetime lucky break, Layla will live happily ever after.*

Since she and the doctor's son would be moving to Ratse after the wedding, Mrs. Ettman wouldn't be able to meddle in their lives very easily. The doctor's son would become a loving, devoted husband, and Layla would be able to pursue her studies to her heart's content. She was quite smart, so perhaps she would even become a renowned scholar.

Matthias shifted his gaze from the chandelier's lights to the family crest beyond them.

Of course, he could find an even better solution, if he were willing to trouble himself a bit. He could meet with Linda Ettman before she met with Layla. Once he told her that he had figured out

her entire plan, she would quietly give up, in the hopes of saving some small degree of dignity.

*Yes. That would also minimize the pain that Layla would have to go through.*

He looked back at the police officer, who looked nervous, perhaps having interpreted his silence as a rebuke for his earlier rudeness.

Matthias knew quite well what would make Layla happy. And doing that for her would be as simple as a flick of the wrist for him.

*So what?* The smile returned to his lips. *How will your happiness help me, Layla? I'll just be left with a bunch of blooming roses and no Layla. That would be a crack in my perfect life.*

Looking at the officer again, he flatly replied, “No, I didn't see any strangers.”

The Arvis staff members standing nearby breathed a sigh of relief.

“Yes, I see. Well thanks for your understanding and cooperation in this matter, Your Grace. I'm sorry to have taken up your time like this, but it's important to be thorough.”

Matthias nodded.

Encouraged by Matthias's cooperative attitude, the officer proceeded to ask Claudine as well. “Did you happen to see any unfamiliar people that morning, Miss?”

“No,” she replied at once. “Unfortunately I don't have any helpful information for you either.” She glanced at Matthias before smiling at the officer.

Matthias continued on his way, bringing the tense situation to a close. The officer went off to question the staff, while Matthias went outside and got into the car waiting out front.

Stepping up to the car window, Claudine asked, “You haven't forgotten about our plans, have you?”

They were going to have tea together and then meet up with Riette for dinner.

“Of course, I haven't, My Lady.”

She smiled contently at his response.

His car then departed at once. As the car left the estate and passed by the road leading to the doctor's house, he gazed quietly out the window.

He wanted to give Linda more fun than she had expected. It would be a fitting payment for all her help and patience.

* * *

Linda put on a respectable, lavender dress. She had put on only a small amount of makeup, and the hat she chose was elegant but simple. She was trying to achieve just the right balance so that she would look neither lavish nor shabby. After checking her appearance in the mirror again, she calmly stepped out of the bedroom.

She had decided to walk and take a stagecoach rather than taking the family carriage today. She wanted to be somewhere away from prying eyes. With that in mind, she had personally stopped by the cottage to invite Layla, and she had carefully chosen their meeting spot as well.

As she waited at the stagecoach stop, she started to wonder whether she should really go through with her plan. *Well, I've already started. There's no turning back now. I've got to go through with it. For Kyle.*

As she was gearing herself up, the stagecoach arrived. She let out a silent sigh and got in. She was willing to do anything for Kyle. Even if it meant reducing herself to a villainess.

* * *

The tearoom Mrs. Ettman had invited Layla to, was on a small street a fair distance away from the center of town. Having arrived early, Layla sat at a table next to the window, waiting for Mrs. Ettman.

The street outside almost seemed too narrow for a carriage to drive down it. On the other side were brick buildings covered with

ivy and moss, including some rundown, old-looking shops.

The tearoom itself was similarly shabby. The awning and the paint on the front window were cracked and faded, and the tablecloths had tea stains on them. It didn't seem like the type of place Mrs. Ettman would like at all.

*Then why had she chosen it?*

Layla was perplexed, but she decided not to overthink it. She knew that that would only make her more anxious and nervous. She had already been feeling tense since the burglary, so she didn't want to add to her worries.

*She probably just wanted a less crowded place where we could talk without distraction. I'm sure she has a lot to discuss, and...*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the jingling of the bell on the door as someone entered the tearoom. Assuming it was Mrs. Ettman, she sprung to her feet, only to see that it was a young gentleman wearing a sharp suit and a fedora. He sat down at a table across the room and opened a newspaper.

She sat back down and stared at the tea stains on the tablecloth.

She had gone to the police station again today, but they had nothing new to report. They told her that since there were no witnesses and no evidence, it was going to be hard to catch the thief. One officer, looking at her with pity, had offered her some advice, saying that rather than holding on to empty hope, she would be better off finding someone who could lend her the tuition money as soon as possible.

*Should I do that?*

Not only Dr. Ettman, but also Dowager Herhardt and Claudine had offered to cover the tuition fee. Chef Mona had stopped by the cottage that morning as well. She had sweetly consoled Layla and Bill, telling them that the Arvis staff were ready to raise the funds for her tuition themselves if the thief weren't caught.

Layla felt grateful towards everyone who had made these kinds of offers, but their kindness weighed heavily on her heart.

As she let out a deep sigh, the bell on the door jingled again.

Once again, she sprung from her chair. “Hello, Mrs. Ettman,” she said, smiling politely and bowing her head.

It was really Mrs. Ettman this time.

# Chapter 37:
## I Really Hate You

Mrs. Ettman stood by the door for a moment, looking at Layla, then slowly approached and sat down across from her. Straightening her posture, she placed her hat on the seat next to her. Layla hadn't seen her in a while. Something about her seemed strange and unfamiliar, which made Layla feel uneasy.

Luckily for Layla, Mrs. Ettman spoke first. “You must have stopped by the police station earlier. Any news on the investigation?”

“They said they haven't gotten any leads yet. But they're still investigating, and they don't intend to give up.”

“I don't know, Layla. In my opinion, that's not the best course of action.”

“Pardon?” Layla asked, surprised.

Just then, their teas arrived. While the waiter was placing the unsightly teacups on the table, there was an awkward silence between Layla and Mrs. Ettman, which continued until the waiter had left. Layla broke the silence, asking, “May I ask what you mean by that?”

Gazing down at the steam rising from her cup, Mrs. Ettman said, “About the money... I have it.”

There was no way that Layla could have misheard the short, clear sentence, but she just stared into space in disbelief.

Looking up and fixing her gaze on Layla, Mrs. Ettman drove the point home. “I'm the one who took your tuition money.”

“That can't be. Mrs. Ettman, how could you...” Layla said, trailing off. She tried to smile politely, but her lips wouldn't budge. She had no idea why Mrs. Ettman would joke about something so serious.

Linda sat motionless, staring at Layla. “I hid it. I wanted to prevent you from being able to go to college with Kyle. I knew it was wrong, but I did it anyway.”

“I don't believe thi-”

“It's theft. Pathetic, cruel theft. And yet I did it. Because I wanted to keep you away from Kyle.”

Layla's mind had gone blank, but she couldn't ignore reality for long. Mrs. Ettman was telling the truth. It was a frightening but blatant fact.

“Layla, I really hate you.” Her brown eyes looked tired and disillusioned as they gazed at Layla. “I hate you so much that I was willing to lower myself to commit that depraved act rather than accept you as my son's wife.”

“M-mrs. Ettman...”

“I thought you were a good girl who knew her place. I never dreamed that you would be so greedy as to use Kyle for your own purposes.”

“Use him? N-no. I wouldn't do that. How could I use Kyle? No.” Layla shook her head desperately. Her hands trembled as they gripped the edge of the table. Soon her whole body started to tremble, but she was too distracted to notice.

“That's why you wanted to be with him, right? You wanted to use him so that you could go to college, and then marry him so that you wouldn't have to live in such squalor anymore.”

Mrs. Ettman knew that she was being unreasonable, but that only made her more vicious in her attack. She knew that Layla's feelings for Kyle didn't go much beyond friendship. She knew that it was Kyle who was madly in love with Layla, not the other way around. As Mrs. Ettman saw it, if it wasn't for her foolish son, Layla would have never developed such greedy desires in the first place. This fact made her feel deeply ashamed, and it made her hate Layla even more.

“My hatred for you has turned me into a thief, Layla. I hate you enough that it drove me to steal. This fact will never change. Knowing that, do you really think we can become family?”

“What... are you... trying to tell me?” Layla asked. Her voice was shaking, but she didn't avoid Mrs. Ettman's gaze.

“You must already know. You're a smart girl.” Her eyes were as cold as the cheap teacup in front of her, which she hadn't touched. “Go ahead and tell people about this if you want.”

The sunlight shone through the window on Layla's ashen face, sparkling in her large, moist eyes. Mrs. Ettman hated that face so much, that it made her shudder.

“Feel free to tell Kyle that I committed that horrible act in the hopes of preventing you two from getting married. Tell the whole world if you want.” She felt confident saying this because she knew that Layla wouldn't tell anyone. “If you tell Kyle, he's going to be so disappointed in me. Our relationship will suffer. Our harmonious family might fall apart.” She was looking with a cold expression at Layla. “But since all of this has happened, you and Kyle won't be able to get married. Whether you hide this or tell Kyle all about it, it won't make a difference. That's all I wanted.”

“Do you really... do you really hate me so much that you would do this?”

“Didn't I tell you already? Yes, I hate you.” Mrs. Ettman stood up. “Yes, I hate you so much that it was worth it to me to make such an extreme choice, and to abandon all my dignity in front of you.” She glared at Layla with a frosty look of contempt. “I'll give you the money back after the registration deadline has passed.” *That way, rather than making a scene, you'll just abandon Kyle,* she almost added, before deciding that Layla already understood everything well enough without that comment. Instead, she said, “I really resent Mr. Remmer. Why did he have to take you in and create this tragedy at Arvis?”

It was clear from the look of deep hurt in Layla's eyes that those last words had hit her the hardest. Still, however, she didn't cry.

Feeling a sense of relief mixed with shame, Mrs. Ettman strolled out of the tearoom, leaving behind the girl she detested.

* * *

Gazing out the car window, Matthias spotted Layla. She was

crouched under a large plane tree on the side of the road leading to the mansion. He recognized her at once. He could only see her back, but he was sure it was her.

“That girl sitting under the tree, isn't it Layla, Mr. Remmer's girl?” the chauffeur asked.

“Is she sick?” asked Mark Evers, Matthias's assistant.

By now the car had gotten closer to her. Sensing their approach, she staggered to her feet and stood up straight. Her head was lowered, so they couldn't see her face, but it was clear from her body that she wasn't doing well.

Mark continued to look at her through the car window for a while, before turning towards the back seat. He was reluctant to make the request, but it was clear from his eyes that he was hoping they could pull the car over and help her. The chauffeur seemed to feel the same way, as he had slowed the car's pace to a crawl.

Matthias gazed at the slowly-moving scenery outside. Layla's head remained stubbornly lowered as she stood against the tree.

*She's crying,* Matthias's intuition told him. He was sure it was true. He probably knew Layla's tears better than anyone else in the world. He turned his gaze away from the window, indicating that they should not stop.

Mark was disappointed but said nothing. The chauffeur stepped on the gas again, submitting to his master's wishes.

Layla's tears pleased Matthias like always, but he wanted to keep them for himself. He didn't like the idea of others intruding on his pleasure. That didn't sound as nice.

Leaving Layla alone with her tears, the car soon passed through the mansion's gate. As Matthias stepped out of the car, he looked very relaxed.

*I wonder if Linda Ettman made her move,* he thought. This was the only reason he could think of why Layla would have been sobbing so hard.

He felt more convinced that his guess was right when he saw the awkward look on Hessen's face as he approached.

“I have something to report, Your Grace.” Walking alongside Matthias, he continued in a hushed voice. “It's unbelievable news. I'm not sure how to tell you...”

Hearing the slight shake in his normally unflappable butler's voice, Matthias knew for sure that Mrs. Ettman had lived up to his expectations. “Let's go to my office,” he said in a soft voice.

* * *

“You got a cold in the middle of the summer? We have the thief to thank for that too. You've been too worried and your health has suffered,” Bill said as he paced around next to Layla's bed.

He had been worried since the previous night, when she had gone to bed early, saying that she wasn't feeling well. Now she was sick in bed. She told him that it was just a cold and that she would be fine after a bit of rest, but Bill wasn't convinced.

“That's it. I think Dr. Ettman should-”

“No,” she said firmly, struggling to sit up in bed.

It had been a hot day since early morning, but she was shivering despite wearing thick, winter pajamas. She looked like she had grown ill overnight.

“No, Uncle Bill. Don't call Dr. Ettman.”

“I just want to call a doctor because you're sick. What's the matter? Did you get in a fight with Kyle or something?”

“No.”

“Even if you're fighting with Kyle, Dr. Ettman can still-”

“Please.” She grabbed his sleeve with her clammy hand. “Just let me rest. That'll be enough. Just leave me be.”

“Layla...”

“If I can just rest, I'll get better. All right?”

She was pleading so earnestly, and Bill gave in. He figured that something was going on between her and Kyle, but it wasn't the time to pry about that. Instead he just reluctantly nodded, which seemed to relieve Layla. Seeing her feebly lie back down, his heart sank. “Fine then, just make sure you eat well and get plenty of

rest!” he shouted. “You should've been doing that from the start, instead of worrying. I'll take care of everything.” He then used his giant hands to daintily pull up her blanket and put a wet towel on her feverish forehead. “Don't worry, kiddo. Even if they never catch that cursed thief, I'll find a way to pay for your tuition, one way or-”

“Uncle Bill,” she said in a faint, breathy voice. “I want to stay here. Don't send me away.”

“You're just afraid again.”

“I'm sorry, Uncle Bill.”

“Sorry? Don't be silly.”

“It's because of me.”

“If you keep talking like that I'm going to get angry.”

“I'll come back to see you.”

As he listened to her say these seemingly random sentences, he let out a deep sigh. “Just rest, for now, Layla. I'll be right back.”

He shut the window and the curtains, but Layla immediately asked him to open them again. She was feeling very cold, despite the summer heat. “It'll get stuffy with those shut... Can you open them just a bit, Uncle Bill?” Even when lying sick in bed, she was a stubborn one.

Bill once again gave in, opening the window halfway and pulling the curtains apart a bit. As he did so, Layla finally shut her eyes.

“If your fever still hasn't gone down by this afternoon, I don't care what you say, I'm calling Dr. Ettman. Got it?”

She made no response as if she hadn't heard his gentle warning. She seemed to be asleep already.

He reluctantly left her and exited the cottage.

Determined to finish his morning tasks as fast as possible, he rushed off to work.

# Chapter 38:
## The Time When I Loved You

Sometimes an accurate prediction can be disappointing. Matthias realized this that morning as he looked down onto the rose garden and didn't see Layla.

Given what she had been through, he figured it would be quite a while before she appeared again. He had already predicted this in his office the previous night, after hearing Hessen deliver his report. Even so, seeing Layla's absence with his own eyes flustered him a bit.

*She's quite a fool,* he thought, snickering as he closed the thin curtains and turned around.

The theft had been a ruse. Linda Ettman's real goal had been to break Layla's heart and destroy her self-esteem. If she couldn't stop her son, she had to get Layla to give up. It was an excellent strategy, and Matthias applauded her for it. She had perfectly understood her opponent, and had stuck in the proverbial dagger at just the right moment to produce the desired effect.

Mrs. Ettman's scheme had provided him with even more entertainment than he had expected. In fact, he had laughed a few times while listening to Hessen's report.

The leisurely weekend morning felt particularly long and dreary. After getting dressed, he looked out the window again while sipping coffee. Bill Remmer and his helpers were busily working, but Layla was still nowhere to be seen. He started to wonder if he had been too greedy in desiring someone so pathetic.

Feeling the urge to mock her, he set out on a light morning walk. The servants didn't interfere, knowing that he enjoyed going for a swim in the river by his cabin when he had some spare time.

He hoped that Layla would be crying so that he could have a good time again. As he reflected on that wish, he arrived at the gardener's cottage. Normally, Layla would be reading a book on the

porch or doing chores in the yard, but she was nowhere in sight. The area around the cottage was completely still and quiet.

Just as he was starting to feel annoyed, a white pigeon flew down. It was flying straight towards the window on the back side of the cottage as if this was its destination.

He reflexively walked in the direction it had flown. The pigeon was sitting calmly on the sill of the half-open window. He noticed that it had a small note tied to its leg. Just then, he realized that the window was to Layla's room.

He approached, but the pigeon didn't fly away.

*Is it a messenger pigeon?*

Furrowing his brow, he calmly reached out of grabbed the bird. It remained docile even in his hand. He stared at the note the bird had brought until he was startled by the sound of crying coming through the window.

It turned out that the room he had thought was empty actually contained Layla, lying on her bed, sobbing miserably.

* * *

Even after opening her eyes, Layla lay still on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Her room was full of bright light, and the birds living in the trees by her window were singing just as brightly.

As each of her bleary senses grew alert, the cruel reality that she had forgotten during her illness came back to her as well. And yet it was strange—the clearer this reality became in her mind, the more peaceful her heart felt. It was as if all those excruciating emotions, which had made it hard even to breathe, had flowed out of her along with the sweat and tears she had shed while sick.

Two, no, three days had passed. After calculating how long she had spent in bed, she slowly sat up. She felt some dizziness for a moment, but it passed.

*I'll have to wash these sheets. I should also dust the window frames, and re-wash the dishes that Uncle Bill tried to wash, and...*

Thinking of all the tasks she would need to do, she felt

overwhelmed and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she decided on one task that needed to take precedence over all others.

She needed to see Kyle.

* * *

“You can't be up and about like this yet, Layla. You should rest!” Kyle shouted, rushing towards Layla after spotting her sitting by the stream, gazing at her reflection in the water. She slowly lifted her head and looked at him. Lingering signs of her illness were still visible in her face.

“Why did you come all the way here?” he asked, hurrying towards her. “I could've seen you at home.”

She was sitting with her arms around her knees on a wide, flat boulder at the edge of the stream. Her silky blonde hair, draped over her slender shoulders, looked like it was part of the afternoon sunlight.

“I have something to tell you,” she said. Instead of her usual smile, her face was blank.

“Ooh, is it something big?” he asked, smiling in her stead.

Instead of smiling in response like she normally would have, she kept looking at him with a blank face.

He then smiled even brightly, as if to rid himself of the ominous feeling he was getting. “I like spending time with you like this too, but you're still getting over your illness. I'm concerned.”

“Kyle.”

“Actually, I had something I wanted to tell you too. This is great. I can tell you here.”

“Kyle.”

“You don't need to worry about your stolen tuition money anymore, Layla. My dad is going to Ratse tomorrow, and he's going to pay for-”

“Kyle, I'm not going to college,” she said, quietly but firmly.

“What...?” he asked, looking up from the stream at her.

They stared into other's deep, still eyes.

“I'm not going to college,” she repeated.

“What do you mean? You passed that difficult exam and everything! I told you, you don't need to worry about tuition, Layla. Please don't be stubborn about-”

“I'm not going to marry you either.” She let go of her knees and adjusted the shawl that was slipping from her shoulders. “I'm going to stay here with Uncle Bill and live the life I always thought I would. I'm sorry, Kyle. I should've told you this at the start, but... I was blinded by greed.”

“Greed?”

“Yeah. I guess I really wanted to go to college and study, even though I said I didn't. Agreeing to marry you was a way I could do that, so I went along with it. I used you.”

“You're lying. Did you really think I'd believe you?” he scoffed.

She remained still, thinking, *I wish it were all a lie.* A sad smile spread over her quivering lips. For a while, she had thought it was sympathy or pity, but then she had realized how things really were. He thought of her as his lover. It was in that spirit that he had proposed to her, but she had accepted his proposal as a friend. It would be a lie for her to claim that there wasn't greed hidden inside her decision to accept the proposal, and this made her feel even worse.

“You're not like other people, Layla. You wouldn't do something like that.” He sprung to his feet. His long shadow loomed over her. “You love me. Do you think I'm so stupid that I don't know that?”

“Sure, I love you.” She couldn't deny it. If someone asked her if she loved Kyle, she would nod at once. They could ask a thousand times, and she would nod a thousand times. “I love you as my best friend. I love you like an older brother, and sometimes like a younger brother.” She remained composed even as she saw his face growing more and more somber. She had to. “But that's not the kind of love you want. I can't, Kyle, I... can't love you like that. That’s why I can't marry you.”

“I don't care,” he replied, gulping uneasily. “I don't care what kind of love it is. If it's love, it's love. It doesn't matter if it's not the love I want, Layla.”

“No. I don't want that.” She slowly stood up.

A forest breeze blew between the two of them. She took a deep breath, gazing down at the ripples the breeze was making on the water.

This forest stream, not far from the cottage, had been their playground when they were young. Since she was afraid of deep water, she had preferred it over the Schulter River, since she could step into it without the water rising above her knees.

She would sit on the boulder under the shade of the trees and read a book, while he would wander about the stream, catching crawdads and small fish. Sometimes he would find pretty shells or rocks and give them to her. *We laughed so much,* she thought. *We always had a good time. The time when I loved you felt so warm. I have so, so many radiant memories like that, and my love for you hasn't changed, and probably never will. Even so, I have to let you go.*

She lowered her head to hide the tears that were forming in her eyes. “I can't. I have to leave you. I'm sorry, Kyle. I should've told you this from the beginning.”

“If that's the only reason, you really shouldn't say that,” he replied. “The world is full of people who get married without love. At least you do love me. That's enough.” He stepped towards her and put his arm around her shoulders. “You think you're using me? Fine. Use me, then. I don't mind.”

“Don't do this.”

“As long as I'm with you, it's all right. Anything is fine. If it'll be of help to you, then use me to your heart's content.”

“Kyle!”

“You can do whatever you want, other than leaving me.” His eyes were tearing up as well.

She clenched her fists to keep her heart from wavering. “No. I don't want that.”

“You really want to go to college, right? You want to desperately enough that you were willing to use me. That's all the more reason not to let me go.”

Finally, she knew she had to say the thing she dreaded telling him most of all. “Kyle, I... I want to marry someone that I love romantically, as a lover. The thought of marrying you and going to Ratse together only makes me more sure of that.”

A look of shocked sadness came over his face.

“I want to marry someone like that and live without shame. I want that even more than I want to go to college.”

“Layla.”

“I thought about using you and just pretending I wasn't. But then, I would be ashamed of that choice for the rest of my life. I would regret it. I don't want to live like that.”

“Layla Llewellyn!”

“If I made that choice, it would taint my memories of all the time I loved you as a friend, as a brother. That's something I never want to do.” Her heartfelt voice was shaking slightly.

Even though she knew it was time to become an adult, she had been ready to make the most childish choice one could make. Out of a desire not to lose Kyle, with the added bonus of being able to go to college, she had accepted his proposal. She now felt deep shame and guilt over that choice.

Mrs. Ettman had been right. The moment she had accepted his proposal, her relationship with Kyle had crossed a line of no return.

Mrs. Ettman hated her for doing that, and she didn't have it in her to endure her hatred. She didn't want to spoil Kyle's image of his mother by telling him what she had done. She didn't want to hurt Uncle Bill either.

There was no going back now. Revealing the truth about the theft would do nothing but hurt them. This was what she had realized after shedding enough tears to drain all the water out of her body.

Therefore, she had to turn away from him. Right then, in silence. That was the only way to protect her self-respect, Kyle's family, and

Bill's feelings.

“Let's keep our old memories untainted, Kyle.” She looked into his eyes and quietly spoke. “Let's do that.”

*Let's leave our wonderful childhood days behind up and become adults,* she wanted to add. Instead, she let a quiet sigh pass through her parched lips. *Don't cry,* she thought to herself. She had said the phrase to herself over and over as she had walked to the stream. Fortunately, it worked, and no tears fell from her eyes. She closed her eyes and started walking.

He was standing in a daze. As she passed by him, he grabbed her wrist. “Don't go.” His large, hot hand was trembling.

She opened her eyes and, instead of answering him, simply pushed his hand away. Despite his physical strength, his hand weakly fell off her wrist at the slightest touch.

She walked away with calm, light steps, leaving him behind, while he gazed into the stream. Her eyes were moist, but she didn't shed a single tear until she arrived back at the cottage.

# Chapter 39:
## My Beloved Son

*She really is a smart girl.*

Mrs. Ettman breathed a sigh of relief as she looked at the closed door of her son's room. Kyle had gone to meet Layla one afternoon a few days earlier, and had returned home utterly devastated. Seeing her son staying in his room, not talking to anyone, she could easily guess the conversation that had occurred between him and Layla.

“Mrs. Ettman, Kyle skipped lunch again today,” the housekeeper reported, coming down from the second floor with a concerned look on her face.

“Just let him be. It's natural for someone's appetite to go away when they're going through a tough time.”

Mrs. Becker was taken aback by this unexpectedly indifferent response from Mrs. Ettman, who used to get very worried when her son skipped even a single meal. But she knew there was no point in asking about it since Mrs. Ettman would likely not reveal the reason for her change in attitude, so she just nodded politely and went on her way.

For the first time in a while, Mrs. Ettman went out to the garden and tended to the flowerbed. The Ettmans' garden was full of exquisite roses brought over from Arvis. Elise von Herhardt sent such roses as gifts only to her closest friends, and Mrs. Ettman had received more of them than most.

She was the only lady in Karlsbar without an aristocratic title that was friends with the ladies of the House of Herhardt, and she was very proud of this. She trusted that if Kyle got married to the low-ranking noble lady that Dowager Herhardt had introduced him to at the party, it would significantly improve the Ettman family's social standing.

Mrs. Ettman had worked so hard to get that opportunity, and

then her husband and son had almost flushed it all away, all because of Layla.

What she had done to Layla was very wrong. Linda didn't deny this. Even so, she didn't regret what she had done. For her son's sake, she was willing to do far worse things many times over. She felt that it was also in Layla's best interest to seek a marriage partner who better matched her social standing.

Mrs. Ettman entered the drawing room carrying an armful of roses of a harmonious variety of colors. As she was carefully arranging them in a vase, Dr. Ettman arrived home.

“How's Kyle? Still the same?” he asked.

“Yes. He seems to be going through something.”

“I suspect something's going on between him and Layla.”

“I think I'll arrange to meet with her,” she casually said as she placed the vase in the center of the table.

“You?” he asked.

“Have you forgotten? Kyle is my son too.” She rose from her seat, smiling. “He's my beloved son, and I love him much more than you.”

* * *

When Mrs. Ettman arrived, Layla was in a corner of the yard scrubbing a large pot. The high-pressure stream of water from the pump had splashed on her, soaking her apron, sleeves, and the ends of her hair.

“Hello, Mrs. Ettman,” she said, not seeming particularly flustered. “Shall we go inside...?”

“No. There's no need for that.” Mrs. Ettman looked Layla up and down, then shook her head as she held out the leather pouch she had brought.

Layla knew what was inside the pouch without having to look. Out of habit, she almost thanked Mrs. Ettman, but she stopped herself and accepted the pouch in silence.

Mrs. Ettman frowned as she looked at Layla staring intently back

at her. “You look like you have a lot to say.”

“Yes,” Layla replied without hesitation.

Mrs. Ettman laughed in response, which caused Layla's heart to start beating faster. But unlike the previous time in the tearoom, she had no urge to lower her head.

“Yes,” Mrs. Ettman replied, “That's only natural. I understand.” She smiled stiffly. “It seems that you're done talking to Kyle. Is that right?”

“I assume you already knew that, or you wouldn't be returning the money.”

A tinge of uneasiness appeared on Mrs. Ettman's face in reaction to Layla's strikingly changed attitude. “What did you say to him?”

“I didn't tell him the thing you're worried about.”

“Worried?”

“Yes. I assume you're worried that I told him everything that happened that day.”

“Wow, I had no idea you were such a bold girl.”

“I'm sorry if I've offended you. I just wanted to let you know that Kyle doesn't know anything about what happened.” She bowed her head in apology. When she raised it again, she looked Mrs. Ettman straight in the eye. “I didn't tell Kyle, and I absolutely never will.” Just saying Kyle's name made her heartache. The memory of that day at the stream, and the image of Kyle as she walked away from him, were still vivid in her mind. They would probably remain as a painful memory for the rest of her life. “I made that decision for Kyle, and not for anyone else.”

“For Kyle?” Mrs. Ettman asked derisively.

Layla wasn't shaken by her tone. “Yes. I know that he loves his mother a lot. No matter what you are to me, to him you're his beloved mother, and I don't want to spoil that for him.”

“I have no idea how someone as brash and rude as you has been able to maintain the facade of a nice, innocence girl for so long.”

“I'm sorry that you feel that way.” Layla bowed her head again.

Feeling that she was being mocked, Mrs. Ettman started blushing.

“However, I meant it sincerely,” Layla continued. “And I wanted to tell you that you have nothing to worry about.”

“Well, since you're saying it with such conviction, I guess I'll trust you on that.” Mrs. Ettman squinted her eyes to hide her relief. “And since you're doing this all for Kyle, I also trust that you'll explain to him why you're calling off the wedding in a way that won't cause him as little pain as possible.”

“Yes. I will. But in exchange,” she said, slowly looking up from the pouch, “I want you to apologize for something.”

“What...? Apologize?”

“Yes. The things you said about me, whether they were true or false, I can accept them. But I want you to apologize for what you said about Uncle Bill.” She was gripping the pouch so tightly, that her knuckles were white, but she stood her ground. “I'm talking about when you said that it was a tragedy for him to take me in and raise me and that you resent him for that.”

Mrs. Ettman sneered as if she didn't understand what Layla was saying.

Layla once again repeated the words Mrs. Ettman had said about Bill, then said, “Please apologize for saying that.” Her soft yet strong voice was carried on the cool evening breeze.

* * *

Matthias grinned as he leaned against the cottage wall, having just overheard an unexpectedly interesting conversation.

He had been walking back towards the mansion after swimming when he had impulsively decided to turn towards the gardener's cottage, hoping to see Layla crying there again. He had encountered something even more entertaining than her tears, so he didn't regret his choice.

He was eager to see the expression on Mrs. Ettman's face, but he decided to be patient, knowing that his entrance would bring their wonderful little scene to its conclusion.

He was leaning against the wall by Layla's window, which looked

out onto the backyard. Gazing at the white pigeon standing on the windowsill, pecking at its feed, he waited for Linda Ettman's response.

“I guess what they say is true; you can't hide your roots.” Linda's voice was shaking with anger. “Apologize? If anything, I feel sorry for Mr. Remmer for having to raise a child like you.”

*Sure enough,* thought Matthias. Feeling satisfied at yet another accurate prediction, he petted the docile pigeon.

Suddenly he recalled the image of Layla from when he had seen her through the window the other day, soaked in a cold sweat, sobbing miserably. Her body had been shaking, and she had been having trouble breathing. It was a horrid sight.

*How pathetic,* he thought, smiling contemptuously. Turning to the pigeon, he whispered, “She should just say it and get it over with, don't you think?”

Having grown bored with his entertainment, he left it behind and walked away from the cottage.

If Layla wasn't going to entertain him, he was going to make his own entertainment.

* * *

The rumor originated from Chef Mona. “Did everyone hear why Layla and Kyle called off their wedding?”

Whenever she ran into other employees of the mansion, she angrily recounted the incredible story she had heard.

“You know how the money Mr. Remmer saved up for Layla's tuition got stolen? Well, guess who stole it... Mrs. Ettman! The mailman, Mr. Berger, just told me. He says she sent someone to take the money and bring it to her, all so that Layla would withdraw from college and call off her marriage to Kyle!”

As she spoke, Mona would occasionally pause for dramatic effect. When she resumed speaking, it was as thrilling as a firecracker, and everyone marveled with amazement. Mona was a notorious gossip, but she never spread idle rumors. Sure enough, she had proof to

back up her claim.

“I know, you can't believe it. That's how I felt at first, too. But get this, the man that stole the money for Mrs. Ettman, he's been caught by the police! Mr. Berger saw him in person when he was delivering mail to the police station. Some of the officers clued him in on the story. But just wait until you hear who he is. Trust me, you'll be shocked.”

Now that she was getting to the most interesting part of the story, she intentionally lowered her voice.

“You all know Mr. Raynor, right? Mrs. Ettman's cousin, the businessman. Well guess what! Mr. Berger says that Mr. Raynor is the thief.”

“Mr. Raynor? You mean Daniel Raynor?”

“Yeah! That Mr. Raynor!” Mona replied with even more zeal. “Then, after she stole the money, Mrs. Ettman arranged for a meeting with Layla, where she said, *'I stole your money, do you still dare marry my son?'* Some gentleman happened to overhear their conversation and reported it to the police, which led to Mr. Raynor getting arrested.”

This part of the story had been as exciting as a full-on fireworks display. As Mona's indignant voice rose in volume, her audience's faces grew more shocked, as if they couldn't believe how wicked Mrs. Ettman was to act so cruelly towards poor Layla. They started talking amongst themselves.

“I knew it. I knew Layla wouldn't have just given up on college and getting married for nothing.”

“How could the elegant Mrs. Ettman do such a cruel thing to that poor girl?”

The audience quickly turned into orators just as impassioned as Chef Mona, and dispersed to continue spreading the truth about the incident.

Before the day was half-over, word had spread to every corner of Arvis. By late afternoon, when Mona's anger had subsided somewhat, she happened upon Bill Remmer working quietly in the

garden.

*Looks like that thick-headed guy still hasn't heard,* she thought.

As much as she loved to spread gossip, she didn't relish the task of relaying a story that would break the hearer's heart. But this was Bill Remmer. He was essentially Layla's father. He needed to know about this more than anyone.

“Yeah. I have no choice but to tell him.”

Having made up her mind, she walked towards the garden.

# Chapter 40:
## Back on Track

The loud commotion made it all the way into Kyle's room. This was because, although his door was shut tight, his window was open.

He drowsily sat up in bed.

“Hey, Mrs. Ettman! Come out here right now! Right now!”

The voice of the man shouting outside was familiar.

*Is that... Mr. Remmer?* Kyle bolted out of bed and ran to the window. Looking down, he saw Bill Remmer having a confrontation with the housekeeper.

“What's all this ruckus?” Mrs. Ettman coldly shouted as she stepped outside.

“So you were the no-good, miserable thief, Mrs. Ettman?” Bill shouted. “How could you do that? No matter how much you hate Layla, how could you do such an awful thing?!”

Kyle had been about to rush downstairs to stop a fight from breaking out, but he stopped in his tracks when he heard what Bill said. *Thief? Why is he talking about the thief here, to Mom?* He stood in place, very confused, while Bill continued to shout angrily. Soon it dawned on him what Bill was suggesting. “No, no, that's impossible...” he muttered to himself as he staggered out of his room.

Walking down the steps to the first floor, he was so distracted he nearly fell. *I don't care that it's Mr. Remmer, I won't let anyone talk to Mom like that. I know he's angry about the theft, but how can he say such mean-*

“Did Layla tell you that?” Mrs. Ettman asked as soon as Bill stopped shouting. “My goodness. How dare she slander me like th-”

“You think Layla would say something like that?” Bill shouted tearfully.

Meanwhile, Kyle had just made it to the front door. Rather than

stepping outside, he listened to Bill continue.

“If it had been Layla who told me what you did, my heart wouldn't have been torn apart like this!”

“If you're going to keep spouting nonsense and making a scene, you can leave right now! Before I call the police!”

“The police is where this information came from! The mailman saw your distinguished cousin locked up at the police station. Are you still going to play innocent?”

“Wh-what did you say...?” Mrs. Ettman stammered, stumbling backward a step.

*Please,* Kyle prayed as he looked at his mother. *Please say it wasn't you. Say it was slander.* But Mrs. Ettman just stood there, saying nothing and breathing unevenly. She was gripping the railing so tightly that her hand was completely white, and soon started trembling.

Kyle staggered towards her. “Mom.”

Only once she heard the mournful sound of her son's voice did she realize he was standing right behind her.

“It's not true, right?” he asked, touching her arm. “Mr. Remmer is mistaken, right? Right?” He tried to smile but his lips refused. It was clear that what he was experiencing was real life, but his mind felt like it was permeated by a thick fog.

The previous few days had been like hell for him. He had visited Layla a few times and begged and pleaded with her, but she wouldn't change her mind. Time seemed to be slipping away.

However, he had one vague hope remaining. Dr. Ettman had gone to Ratse and paid Layla's tuition before the deadline. Thus, if Kyle could just persuade her to give up her foolish ideas, everything would be all right. He had faith that this would work.

On today's visit, he had told her that if marriage sounded too daunting, they could just get engaged, and not worry about the wedding for now. Once engaged, they could go to college together. That would be enough for him. Given enough time, she would start to love him romantically, and they would live happily ever after.

This was what he had said to her earlier today. But now...

“Mom!” he shouted tearfully.

The ashen-faced Mrs. Ettman stared at the railing and didn't dare say anything. Just then, Dr. Ettman arrived home.

Two police officers stepped out of the car along with him. When Mrs. Ettman saw the officers, her legs gave out and she fell to the ground.

Dr. Ettman begged the officer's pardon, then walked towards his wife alone. Before he spoke to her, he took off his hat and spoke to Bill. “I'm sorry, Mr. Remmer. I really don't know what to say. I'm so sorry.”

Kyle's eyes filled with despair as he listened to his father apologizing repeatedly.

“As you can see, things are a bit hectic today, so it will be hard to have a proper conversation right now. Once things calm down, how about I pay you a visit and apologize again?”

“Sure, that's fine,” Bill replied, rubbing his eyes roughly.

Once Bill stepped away, the police officers walked a few steps closer.

“Why did you do it, Honey?” Dr. Ettman asked, looking coldly down at his wife on the ground.

“No. It's not what you think...”

“Daniel is at the police station. He confessed to everything already. He said that you put him up to it.”

Mrs. Ettman had been mumbling excuses, but once she heard her husband say her cousin's name, she fell silent.

“So don't even think about lying to me, Linda.”

“Honey!”

“First you put on a show like you're fine with Layla, and then you plan a scheme like that? I can't believe that you, my wife, Kyle's mother, did that!” Dr. Ettman had been trying to hold back his emotions, but he couldn't stop his anger from distorting his face.

“Oh! It's all your fault?” Mrs. Ettman cried. “Why?! Why did you approve of Layla and make me do such a horrible thing?”

“Are you really blaming me for the unspeakable act you committed?”

“Yes. It's all your fault! I told you I hated her from the start! If you had listened to me then, it wouldn't have come to this! If it weren't for you, I, I would've...” Her acrimonious shouting gave way to sobbing.

She covered her face, and soon tears began to leak through her fingers.

Dr. Ettman let out a few deep sighs, then helped his wife up. The police officers showed their respect to the renowned doctor by allowing him to bring his wife to the car himself.

Kyle stood in a daze, staring at the waking nightmare unfolding in front of him. Eventually, dark dusk fell. Even the gloomy twilight was too bright for him, however, so he closed his eyes.

At that moment, his only wish was for the whole world to be enveloped in darkness.

* * *

“Don't cry, Uncle Bill. Please.” Layla placed her handkerchief on the table.

Bill, who had been glaring at his beer glass like it were his foe, looked up in surprise. “Crying?! Who's crying?” Despite his vehement denials, he picked up her handkerchief and patted at the corners of his eyes.

The untouched food on their plates was getting cold. But neither of them urged the other to eat. While he was downing his beer glass, she stared at the edge of the table with tired eyes.

She had been unaware of what had happened until some Arvis staff members came to the cottage to offer words of consolation. She knew that Mrs. Ettman wouldn't have told anyone, and of course, she herself had kept her lips sealed, and yet somehow everything about the incident had been revealed.

She had no idea who could have overheard their conversation and talked to the police. That day, the only people at the tearoom

had been her, Mrs. Ettman, and a stranger.

*Was it that man, then? Who in the world is he?*

She racked her brain, but she had no guess who it could be. One thing was clear, however. She had caused Kyle an irreparable wound. She had wanted to protect his heart, but it had ended up broken. She had heard that the police officers that came with Dr. Ettman had taken Mrs. Ettman to the police station and that Kyle had watched the whole thing.

“Don't cry, Layla.” Setting his glass down, Bill offered Layla her handkerchief back.

“Crying? Who's crying?” she replied, parroting his earlier denial while wiping her tears away.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I know so little about the world, and yet I pushed you to venture out into it. And now look what's happened.”

“If you keep talking like that, I'm going to get angry, Uncle Bill.”

“As for marriage... sure. It's probably best that you avoided that one. It was the right choice. You had to call it off.”

She nodded. A tear fell on the edge of her faintly-smiling lips and glistened in the light.

“But you should still go to college, Layla. Dr. Ettman has already paid your tuition. I'll give him the stolen money that we got back, and then it'll be like I paid your tuition. The college has nothing to do with Kyle.”

“No.”

“If you stay at a boarding house I could pay for your room and board. It'll be tight, but I should be able to manage...”

“I'm going to go to college, Uncle Bill. I haven't given up. Just not now.” She reached out and grabbed his hand. “I'm going to become a teacher. Then once I've saved up enough money, I'll go to the capital and retake the entrance exam. That was my original plan and dream. I veered off course for a bit, thinking that I'd found a shortcut. But now I'm back on track.”

“But how can you withdraw from college when you already passed the entrance exam?”

“Don't you have faith in me?” Now she was smiling naturally. “I'm confident that I'll pass it again next time. In fact, I'll pass it with such a high score that I'll get a scholarship. Just wait and see.”

“Oh, Layla...”

“You always said you knew I would become an outstanding adult. So just have faith in me one more time.”

*What a wonderful girl she is, Bill thought. I'd rather that she was crying. Her beautiful smile is tearing me apart. What'll I do with her? And what will happen to Kyle?* His shoulders started to shake as he became overwhelmed with emotion. He quickly lowered his head to hide his face, and his tears began to drip onto the table.

“It's all right, Uncle Bill,” she said, rising from her chair to walk towards him. “I'm really all right.” She wrapped her slender arms around him. “Truly. So, let's tell the police that we don't want to press charges against Mrs. Ettman. We can tell them that we got the money back, and nothing more needs to be done.” She gently patted his back as she spoke in a surprisingly calm voice.

*What'll I do with you?* he thought, as tears continued to stream from his eyes. Wiping away the tears, he nodded.

He had considered what Mrs. Ettman did to be unforgivable. But when he saw her collapse right in front of him, with Kyle watching, aghast, it had pained him. No matter how horrible an act Linda Ettman had committed, she was Kyle's mother, and Kyle was like a brother to Layla.

“Let's do that. If that's how you feel, then I'm all for it, Layla.”

# Chapter 41:
## How to Get Rid of a Beautiful Misfortune

After hearing Mrs. Ettman's story one evening at dinner, Dowager Herhardt's evaluation was blunt. “Goodness, what a mess.” She took a breath then continued. “To think, the wife of such a prestigious doctor getting arrested for aiding and abetting theft. How vulgar.” She took a sip of wine to wash the indecent story from her lips.

“We'll have to sever our friendship with her,” Elise von Herhardt remarked with a similar expression to that of her mother-in-law.

Linda Ettman had spent the night at the police station, and she had been released at noon the following day after Bill and Layla went there in person and said that they weren't going to press charges since they had gotten their money back.

“This incident will tarnish Dr. Ettman’s reputation as well,” Elise said. “What a shame. He's a good man. Do we have to find a new family doctor now?”

“I don't think that's necessary. It wasn't his fault, after all,” Dowager Herhardt replied, displaying her unwavering trust in Dr. Ettman. “Scandals like this one are on everyone's mind for a short while, then they are quickly forgotten. I hope the whole thing's not too troubling for Kyle.” Her voice was tinged with sympathy as she spoke about Kyle. “I feel bad now that we allowed him to spend so much time here at Arvis.”

As dinner was coming to an end, Elise suddenly remarked, “None of this would have happened if not for Layla.” She looked to Claudine for agreement.

Claudine nodded at once. “That's true. She wasn't trying to, but Layla has ruined the Ettman family,” she firmly said, glancing across the table at Matthias.

Matthias was never very talkative, but this evening he was particularly quiet. However, he showed no signs of being upset or distracted. He looked calm and relaxed as usual.

The meal soon ended. Likewise, the scandal was soon forgotten after spending a short while on the lips of everyone in Arvis.

Instead of going to his study, Matthias went straight to his bedroom.

Earlier in the day, he had instructed Hessen to tell the man that had been tailing Linda Ettman to go to the police station and say that he had witnessed the theft. He was to do this right when the mailman would be arriving at the station. It was the same mailman who delivered mail to Arvis, so Matthias knew that this would result in the rumor spreading through Arvis quickly. Everything had gone just as he had expected it to. It had been especially helpful that the talkative mailman had run into the person with the biggest mouth in all of Arvis, the chef.

It was quite entertaining, despite being utterly predictable. *I wonder if Linda Ettman cried,* Matthias thought as he switched on the desk lamp next to the window. *I bet she did, just like Layla.* This simple conjecture made the whole thing even more fun.

The question of Layla Llewellyn and Kyle Ettman getting married was now thoroughly off the table. No matter how each of them felt, marriage was out of the question. Whatever good fortune Layla might have had was gone now.

Matthias impulsively turned and walked to his liquor cabinet. He wasn't much of a drinker, so all the bottles were unopened.

He grabbed the first bottle he saw, then opened it and poured the amber liquor into a crystal glass.

*Layla's wings have been clipped,* he thought as he turned back around with the glass in his hand. *So she will now be staying within Arvis's walls.*

The sense of relief that this fact gave him outweighed even his own self-disillusionment.

He stared for a long while at his canary, sleeping soundly in its cage. His gaze then turned to the garden beyond the window and then to the glass of golden liquor in his hand.

He didn't feel half bad compared to how he had felt the night

when he had learned that Layla and the doctor's son were going to be married. That horrible night, for the first time in his life, he had wanted to kill someone. Things had turned out relatively well, at least no one had died.

He quietly set the glass down on the table without having taken a single sip. He didn't need alcohol's help. He already knew how to rid himself of this messy feeling, of this beautiful misfortune.

* * *

The stolen tuition incident created quite a stir in Arvis. Things finally settled down just as summer reached its peak. Bill Remmer had gotten his money back and decided against pressing charges. This enabled Mrs. Ettman to avoid punishment, but it didn't clean her image in the public eye.

“Kyle,” Dr. Ettman said, knocking at his son's door. After hearing no response, he slowly opened the door.

Kyle was sitting at his desk, staring blankly out the window. Dr. Ettman approached, but Kyle didn't move. “Kyle,” he repeated, gently placing his hand on Kyle's shoulder.

Kyle flinched and turned around. His face looked gaunt.

Dr. Ettman let go of his shoulder and leaned against the desk. “Your Mother is doing a bit better.”

“Sure,” Kyle flatly replied.

After coming home from the police station, Mrs. Ettman had at first been bedridden from the shock of the experience, and she had been practically unable to eat or drink anything. She had a high fever that lasted for a few days, which had greatly worried Dr. Ettman, but luckily her condition had gotten no worse than this.

“I found a place for you to stay in Ratse,” Dr. Ettman calmly said.

“A place?”

“It's a decent size for one person, and it's fully furnished, so-”

“You think I'm going to college alone?” Kyle scoffed. “Without Layla? After causing Layla all that pain, I'm supposed to just... go to college like nothing happened?”

“I understand how you feel, Kyle, but if you're stubborn about this, it will only hurt Layla more.”

“Dad!”

“I'm just saying, your relationship with Layla is over, and you should accept that. That's the only way forward for you, Layla, and all of us. You've got to start living your life.” He stared steadily into his son's empty eyes. It was a horrible situation, but he knew that this was all the more reason why he needed to be level-headed about it.

Nothing mattered more to him than protecting Kyle. He suspected that Kyle's wounds would gradually heal once he left Karlsbar, gained some distance from Layla, and entered the new world of college. That was all Dr. Ettman's could hope for at the moment.

“Your Mother is the one who made the mistake, but we're not free from blame either. We didn't listen when she told us that she could never accept Layla. In a way, we're the ones who drove her to her actions.”

“Are you talking about how she couldn't accept that Layla couldn't satisfy her vanity, being an orphan without a lavish background?”

“Enough, Kyle! I won't allow you to speak about your Mother that way, even if it's true.”

“I'm not sure about any of it anymore. Is she really the Mom that I knew and loved? And why do I have to go to college?”

“Are you really giving up on life because your first love didn't work out?”

“Dad... do you really think that's all Layla is to me?”

“If she's more than that to you, that's all the more reason to be rational about this. The more you act foolishly like this, the worse it will be for Layla as well!”

“I can't leave here without Layla.”

“You and Layla can never be together again.”

“No!” Kyle wailed. “There's got to be a way. Somehow... if I beg,

if I apologize, if I persuade her to change her mind..."

"Wake up, Kyle. You know that that's impossible." Dr. Ettman shook his son's shoulder as he spoke. His voice had gradually grown louder through the course of the conversation.

Kyle shook his head repeatedly, refusing to accept reality. He pushed his father's hand off his shoulder and ran out of the room.

Dr. Ettman knew where his son was headed, but he didn't have the heart to stop him. He reasoned that it might be best for Kyle to face an unchangeable reality straight on, even if it hurt him.

* * *

It was an especially hot, muggy day, but Layla's outfit was almost stiflingly neat and tidy, from the stiffly-pressed collar of her blouse, which was buttoned all the way up, to her smooth, unwrinkled skirt and stockings. Even under the scorching afternoon sun, she looked perfect. Her cheeks were flushed and she was out of breath from the heat, but she kept a straight posture as she walked, even once she was no longer in anyone's sight.

Lately, wherever she went, she was greeted with looks of sympathy. Everyone who saw her rushed over to console her and criticize Mrs. Ettman. Some even started weeping at the mere thought of what had happened to her.

Today was no exception. She had come to Gillis Girls' School hoping to find a teaching position, although it was quite late in the season for that. The teacher she was meeting with immediately let out a deep sigh when she saw her.

*"Yes, Layla. You've got to gather your spirits and find a realistic solution. It's sad, but what else can you do when things have already turned out the way they have?"* she had said, holding onto Layla's hands.

When she passed people she knew in the city, their faces seemed to be offering similar advice.

Their expressions made her feel gratitude mixed with shame. Thus, she just greeted them courteously with a smile. Each time she

did so, she noticed a slight smile appear on their lips as well, but she tried not to think about it. Fortunately, she was too busy maintaining her clean-cut appearance and smile to worry about anything else.

After consoling Layla for a long while, the teacher sighed again and said, *"I wish I could do something more for you, considering your situation, but this is the best I can offer right now."*

All the positions for new teachers at schools in Karlsbar were already filled. The best option available to Layla was at a school in a small town about an hour away from Karlsbar by train.

After much deliberation, Layla finally accepted the position. Commuting each day would be too much, so she would have to find a boarding house to stay at during the week, but she would be able to return to Arvis on weekends. After teaching there for a year, there would probably be an open position in Karlsbar, and she would be able to move back.

After arriving in front of Arvis's magnificent gate, she took off her hat and took a moment to catch her breath.

More than anyone else, she had had a hard time dealing with Uncle Bill. When she smiled, he would get a sad look in his eyes. Thus, she knew she certainly couldn't cry in front of him. Today she had good news, however, so perhaps it would be all right.

Cautiously holding on to that hope, she continued walking. It was a little sad that she would be going to a school in a distant location, but it wasn't like she was leaving Bill permanently.

She tried to smile more brightly as she increased her pace. Wanting to tell Bill the news right away, she skipped the cottage and went straight to the garden. As she entered the rose garden and passed under the archway, she ran into Kyle. "Kyle...?" Her eyes widened with shock.

He ran towards her, almost as if he were being chased. He seemed like a completely different person as he grabbed her wrist and said, "Let's go, Layla."

"Where? Let go of my wrist and we can talk, okay?"

“Let's run away, Layla,” he said, gripping her wrist even tighter.

# Chapter 42:
## No Place in This World

Layla's eyes started to tremble as she observed Kyle's blank expression, his ashen face, and his disheveled clothes and hair. “Don't be like that, Kyle. Let's just—”

“Let's go somewhere. Anywhere,” he muttered. It was as if he hadn't heard her speaking. “Just the two of us. Let's go somewhere we can be happy. Come on.” He then grabbed her hand and started to pull her as he began to walk.

She tried to resist, but he paid no mind as he continued to walk with long strides.

“Mr. Remmer! Mr. Remmer! Look over there! Someone's dragging Layla away!” shouted one of Bill's garden helpers who happened to be working nearby.

As soon as Bill looked in the direction the helper was pointing, his face flushed with shock. He threw his pruning shears to the ground and frantically chased after Kyle.

His flustered helpers soon joined him in the chase.

“Kyle Ettman! Let go of her hand right now!” Bill shouted in an angry, thunderous voice that echoed all around. By the time he caught up with him, Kyle still hadn't let go of her hand. He raised his huge fist and punched Kyle in the face.

Kyle stumbled and started to fall, but still didn't let go of her hand. Thus, she was pulled along with him and they both tumbled into the rose bed.

“Layla!” Bill screamed as he rushed towards her and helped her up. Her cheeks and hands were covered with scratches from the roses' thorns.

Kyle's eyes finally seemed to be regaining focus. He looked with horror at the bloody scratches on Layla's face as he stood up. “L-Layla! Are you all right? You're bleeding...”

“I'm fine,” she replied, calmly pushing his hand away from her

face. “You're way more hurt than I am.”

“No. I'm...” Only then did he notice the blood trickling down from his hands, and the bloodstains on his shirt. He felt a sharp pain in his cheeks and neck, but he didn't care.

“I'm okay, Uncle Bill,” Layla quickly said, noticing that Bill seemed ready to approach Kyle again. “Kyle,” she said, looking at Kyle with her swollen, glassy eyes. “There's no such place.” Her lips formed into a sad, quivering smile. Her cheeks were flushed, but her voice was calm. “There is no place in this world where we can be happy together, just the two of us.”

“Layla...”

“If you keep acting like this, it'll be really hard for me. I don't think I'll be able to stand it.”

“Layla, please.”

“So, take care of yourself, and I'll take care of myself.”

“How am I supposed to do that without you?”

“You should go to college as originally planned. Stay healthy and study hard, so that you can become a good doctor.” She kept smiling even as she saw the pained look in his eyes. Her vision started to blur from the tears falling from her eyes. “Kyle. Where's the kind friend I used to know? That's how I want to see you.”

Kyle had started crying too. Gritting his teeth, he stopped himself from sobbing, and stared at her with bloodshot eyes.

“If you're doing well, I'll be all right too,” she said. “If we keep doing well in our separate lives, who knows. After some time has passed, maybe we'll be able to greet each other with smiles again.”

“I'm sorry… I'm sorry, Layla,” he said. The sobs he was holding back then burst forth.

Between tearful gasps, he said, “It was all my fault. It was because of me that you... I'm sorry.” He collapsed to the ground again. Beams of sunlight shone on him like shards of glass.

Quietly shaking her head, she crouched down in front of him. “No. Don't say that, Kyle. I don't hold it against you. How could I?”

“Layla...”

“So, take care of yourself for me. All right? You'll do that, won't you?”

Gasping like he was being strangled, he hugged her tightly. Her pristine white blouse was soon wet with his tears and blood.

Bill, who had been sighing repeatedly as he watched them, couldn't stand to watch anymore, so he turned away. The garden helpers standing nearby did the same. With eyes full of resentment, Bill looked up at the blazing sun. Now, more than ever, he longed for this dreadful summer to be over.

* * *

Kyle left for the capital sooner than originally planned. The reason given was that he had a lot of preparation to do in the capital before classes began, but no one believed that excuse.

On the morning of his departure, Layla woke up earlier than usual. Hearing the sound of a bird cooing, she turned her head towards the window and saw Phoebe.

She put her glasses on, slowly walked to the window, and opened it wide. There was a note tied to Phoebe's ankle. Since Phoebe was trained to carry notes between her and Kyle's rooms, she knew who the note was from without having to look.

After hesitating for a moment, she took the note and unfurled it.

*Layla, I'm leaving for the capital today. Like a coward, I'm going to the place that I was supposed to go with you.*

*I'm not going to lie and say that this is the best thing for you and me. When you get down to it, I'm running away. I'm turning away from the mess that real life has become and leaving you behind. Like a coward, I'm pretending that what you said is true, that everything will be all right.*

*I'm sorry. I'm well aware that saying sorry won't wash away your wounds, but I still want to say it. I'm sorry for the pain my mom caused you, and I'm sorry that I wasn't able to stop her. I hurt you by naively thinking that everything could be fixed easily. I'm only now realizing*

*that.*

*But Layla, I'll be back. I'll return to you, and it won't be too late. You may be right that there's no place in this world where we can be happy together. But Layla, even if there's no such place now, I'll be sure to make a place like that for us, and I'll take you there.*

*Till then, I'll take care of myself, just like you told me to. You take care of yourself too.*

*Farewell, my beloved Layla.*

Layla slowly read the tiny piece of paper filled with Kyle's neat handwriting. The morning breeze shook the disheveled hair from her cheek. After a while, she turned from the window and placed the note deep inside one of the drawers of her desk, before hurrying to start her morning.

It was an extremely busy day. She cleaned the cottage thoroughly, not leaving a single speck of dust, and she made a lot of delicious food. After finishing lunch, Bill went back to work. Just then, a few of his coworkers from Arvis stopped by the cottage.

"Are you doing all right, Layla?" Chef Mona asked, holding out a basket full of cookies and cupcakes.

"Yes," Layla replied, smiling as she received the gift. "Thank you. Why don't you come in for a cup of tea before you go?"

"No thanks, I don't need any tea," Mona replied. The maids that had come along with her nodded.

"That's right. We're just here to make sure you're doing okay," said one of them.

"Yes. You know, they say first loves never work out. I'm sure you'll meet another man way better than Ky—"

"Oh my, look at the time!" Mona said, cutting the second maid off before she could say something that might make Layla feel bad. "We'd better get back to the mansion. We've got to get ready for Lady Herhardt's teatime."

Layla said goodbye, then carried the heavy basket back to the kitchen. She took the cookies and cupcakes out one at a time, then

suddenly froze. There was a cookie with peach jam on it, Kyle's favorite.

She stared across the table at the seat where Kyle had always used to sit. The days when the three of them would sit around the table were gone and would never return. All those meals where they enjoyed delicious food and boisterous conversation under the warm light of the lamp, they were now a thing of the past.

After staring at the empty chair for a moment longer, she snapped out of her daze, and quickly finished taking the treats out of the basket. Then, grabbing her hat and her old bag, she hurried out the back door and set off towards the forest path.

“Fennel... Baby's breath... Butterfly bush...” She whispered the names of the flowers growing by the path as she walked. “Linnet... Swallowtail... Grasshopper...” She also whispered the names of the birds and insects she saw. The odds and ends in her bag clinked rhythmically in accompaniment to the singsong sound of her whispering.

She walked and walked, and finally stopped in front of a large tree growing next to the Schulter River. She climbed up the tree, almost like she was hiding. Sitting on a sturdy branch high up on the thick trunk, she gazed at the blue water serenely flowing down below.

The sunlight shimmered on the water dazzlingly.

* * *

“Everything has been taken care of in accordance with your instructions, Your Grace,” Hessen said after finishing a short phone call.

Matthias slowly nodded, as if he understood what Hessen meant without need for further explanation. His gaze was fixed on the river visible through the large window.

“They will send a telegram later today,” Hessen added, thus concluding his report. He then discussed several other topics.; the guest list for the dinner scheduled the following week, Count and

Countess Brandt's upcoming visit, staff hiring issues, and the like. Each new topic was met with a concise response from Matthias.

“I'll take my leave then, Your Grace,” Hessen said, having reached the end of his list of issues to report. He bowed and left.

Matthias, now alone in the cabin, lazily walked down the steps to the first floor. The cabin was built as a sort of houseboat, floating on the water. The boathouse took up half of the cabin's first story and let out directly into the river. To cross the river, all one had to do was unmoor one of the boats floating in the boathouse and start rowing.

Standing on the floor of the boathouse, Matthias stripped off his clothes and jumped into the water. As he swam through the boathouse's arch-shaped exit, the sunlight glistened on his naked body.

He slowly swam, letting the current carry him. With his supple swimming technique, he looked like he was part of the river.

It was only natural that his fixation on things he couldn't have would grow and intensify. He knew this to be true, even though he also knew that obtaining the object of his desire would cause it to lose its appeal for him. He knew it was no different with her.

He came to this conclusion as he gasped for air. He knew it was silly for him to have gotten swept up by a fleeting covetousness, but he still graciously accepted his desire to have her. And now he could have her all he wanted. After failing to protect his first love, the boy had gone and left Layla behind. Everything in Matthias's world was in its right place, in perfect order.

By the time he turned and began swimming back to the cabin, the sun had started to set. As he gazed at the familiar tree by the river's edge, his eyes narrowed. He could hardly believe it, but she was there.

*Layla.* He quietly repeated her name, sending ripples over the surface of the water.

# Chapter 43:
## A Beautiful Song

Matthias swam back to the cabin, got dressed, and left. The color of the sunset was deepening, but Layla was still sitting in the tree, crying. She still had not noticed his presence.

He stopped in front of the tree. After a while longer, she finally noticed him. But unlike on previous occasions, she didn't flinch or look away. Nor did she seem scared or on guard.

Matthias wondered at this for a moment, then the reason presented itself to him—her eyes were pointed at him, but she wasn't looking at him. Her unfocused gaze seemed to be pointed somewhere far away, perhaps at the place where the doctor's son was.

As Matthias started to grin, her gaze regained its focus. As her green eyes took in his face, they filled with confusion. Her face stiffened and her shoulders hunched. That was the Layla Llewellyn that he knew.

Looking at her moist eyes, he crossed his arms. It was a leisurely evening. There was nothing he needed to hurry back for, and there was no reason why he couldn't wait for her. A look of alarm spread over her face as she realized that he had no intention of leaving. This made him laugh. “He's not coming, Layla. You know that, don't you?” He took a step towards the tree. “Kyle Ettman. The boy you're waiting for. Ah. Perhaps I should call him the boy who abandoned you?” Staring straight into her eyes, he smiled. His voice remained soft and gentle even as he said these piercing words.

Smiling hollowly, she looked up and saw that the birds had left the dusky sky. The scenery seemed to swell as she gazed at it until tears formed and started to flow down her cheeks.

Without saying anything in response to him, she started chewing on her lip. She realized that if she waited for that cruel man to leave, she might have to stay up in the tree until late at night.

She climbed down the back side of the tree, where he couldn't see. She felt some vertigo, perhaps because of all the tears she had shed, but luckily she made it safely to the ground without an accident.

Leaning against the tree, she lifted her apron and wiped her tears. Then she neatened her disheveled hair and stood up straight. After that, she went around to the other side of the tree. The duke was still blocking the path that led back to the cottage.

Rather than slipping around the side of him, she started to approach him, one step at a time. Her tears continued to flow, soon wetting her whole face again, but she didn't care. She knew she couldn't hide the tears, so she wore them with pride. She didn't want to be reduced to his plaything. “I'm sorry for my rudeness,” she said. “I'll be going now. Goodbye, Your Grace.” Standing about two paces away from him, she curtsied with utmost politeness. By now, displaying the formalities that aristocrats expected was as natural to her as breathing.

Just as she was about to brush past him, he said, “Layla.”

She flinched but didn't stop.

“Layla Llewellyn,” he said, laughing as he turned around.

She kept walking onward as if she couldn't hear him.

He frowned, feeling that she was being unacceptably rude. Just then, she suddenly tripped and fell. Her shoulders and back trembled intermittently as she sat slumped on the ground, crying.

Clicking his tongue, he slowly approached her. That strong-willed girl, whose eyes maintained their look of bold independence even while they were shedding tears, was now sobbing on the ground in an undignified posture.

Squinting, he went down on one knee in front of her and picked up her glasses. She barely lifted her head. Her tears, which had brought him so much joy in the past, no longer did so.

Seeing her cry because of Kyle Ettman gave him a feeling that it took him a moment to identify: humiliation. It was a feeling he had never before experienced.

“Don't cry,” he quietly said, grabbing her chin.

She tried to turn her head away, but she couldn't overcome his fierce grip. “Let go!” she shouted, struggling to free herself.

“Don't cry,” he calmly repeated. Ignoring her resistance, he was easily able to dominate her with one hand.

“Don't you enjoy seeing me cry?” she asked in frustration. The feeling of indignation that his inescapable grip was giving her caused her tears to flow even more.

“Since when have you been interested in what I enjoy?” he asked, chuckling at the sight of her sniffling. “I thought you hated it when I enjoyed things.”

“No,” she replied, trying to hold back her tears and weakly shaking her head while he maintained his grip on her chin. “Whether you enjoy things or not has nothing to do with me. Just like my tears have nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, but Layla, they do have to do with me.” He cocked his head. “Don't cry,” he said again, looking at her with a gentle expression.

“Do I need your permission to cry?” she scoffed.

“Maybe you do.”

“What do you mean? You don't have that right.”

“That right...?”

“Just because you're the owner of Arvis doesn't mean you own *me*.”

“Really?” He frowned for an instant before smiling again. “Then shall I take you for myself now?” The smile quickly faded, leaving his face blank and expressionless, like still water.

Her lips started to quiver with fear.

“That way, I'll be your owner.” He put his finger to her lips.

She shuddered as the sensation brought back her memory of when he had touched her lips the previous summer. Her heart, which had been filled with sadness over losing Kyle, suddenly froze. “No.” Unable to stand the thought of being sprawled out at his feet anymore, she used all her strength to lift her upper body from the ground.

He let go of her at once and stood up, like a child who had grown tired of a toy.

Enveloped by his shadow, she staggered to her feet. Her face was messy with dirt and tears, but her eyes remained strong. “To think that you, a duke... a duke with a fiancée... would behave in such a dishonorable way... I don't like it at all.”

“So?” he asked, fiddling with her glasses, which he was still holding. “What do your feelings have to do with me?” There was no hostility in his voice. “I want you.”

What he wanted, he got; it was as simple as that. He wanted Layla Llewellyn, so he was going to have her. He needed to discard her so that his life could be complete again, but he knew he couldn't discard her unless he first had her.

He gently put her glasses back on her stunned face. “Go.” As he drew his hand away from her face, she collapsed to the ground again.

He gazed down at her for a short while, then proceeded to stroll alongside the river.

She remained in the same spot long after he was out of sight.

* * *

“Layla! Layla! Come here quick!” Bill shouted excitedly from his seat on the porch as Layla returned to the cottage.

Forcing a smile, she walked right up to him. She knew she couldn't fool him with her fake smile when her overall appearance was so disheveled, but she didn't want to let him see her crying like a fool either. “What's the matter, Uncle Bill?”

“A telegram arrived. It's for you.”

“A telegram?” she asked, cocking her head.

Bill handed her the telegram. It was a notice saying that a teaching position had opened at a village school not far from Arvis. Next semester, she could start teaching there, instead of at the other school that was in a more distant town.

“That's odd, they said there were no teaching positions open in

Karlsbar...” It was good news, but it gave her a strange feeling.

Bill reached out his large hand and patted her on the head. “I wasn't looking forward to you going so far away. This is such a lucky break, Layla,” he said, letting out a sigh of relief.

She nodded and smiled at him. It *was* a lucky break, just like he had said. She had planned to stay at a boarding house in the town where the original school was located and come back to Arvis to see Bill on weekends. Even so, she had felt a pang in her heart whenever she thought about spending so much time away from him.

However, the duke's face also flashed into her mind when she thought of Arvis, and this made it hard for her to rejoice at the thought of continuing to live there full-time. She didn't want to leave Uncle Bill, but she did want to escape the duke. She felt like a fool.

“Is something the matter again, Layla?” Bill asked.

She realized she was frowning. “No,” she said, smiling again, her face illuminated by the moonlight. “I'm just a bit stunned by the unexpected stroke of luck.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Rather than nodding, she just widened her smile. “You must be hungry. Let's have a nice dinner, Uncle Bill.”

* * *

The curtains half-covering the open window in the bedroom ballooned into the room and slowly settled back down several times with the breeze. The quiet piano piece flowed in a similar rhythm. The playing was both delicate and showy, and at times temperamental.

Matthias was sitting in a chair by the window, holding a handkerchief and a pair of tin scissors. He snapped his fingers, and his canary flew over and perched on his hand at once. Even birdsong seemed to be amenable to training, as the canary's song had grown more beautiful over time.

Matthias smiled at the bird, which seemed to be singing in response to the piano music. It shook its tiny body with its soft feathers and cocked its head as if deep in thought.

When it stopped singing, Matthias gently wrapped it in the handkerchief. The bird-keeper always covered the birds' eyes before clipping their wings so that they wouldn't know who had clipped them and develop a fear of humans.

Matthias deftly spread the feathers of the obedient bird's wing. For a while, he had left the task of wing-clipping to the bird-keeper, but by now he had learned to do it himself. The first few times he tried it, he clipped them too short and the bird bled. Luckily it was only a few drops of blood, but he didn't like seeing its golden wings stained red, so he learned to be more careful. He found the feathers that needed clipping, then picked up the scissors from his lap. A few snipping sounds were followed by a few tiny feathers fluttering down onto his well-polished shoes.

After clipping the other wing as well, he removed the handkerchief from the bird's eyes. It flapped its freshly-clipped wings a few times, then perched on his finger. It then resumed its singing as if nothing had happened. It was a beautiful song.

# Chapter 44:
## The First Autumn

“Goodness! Oh, my goodness! Layla, not again!”

The frantic shouting coming from the foot of the tree almost made Layla drop the apple she had just started eating.

Barely catching the apple before it fell, she looked down and saw just the person she expected—Chef Mona, glaring up at her with her arms crossed.

“Hi, Chef Mona! Isn't the weather great today?” she casually said before putting the apple and her book into her bag.

Mona's frown deepened as she watched Layla nimbly slide down the trunk of the tree. Just then, Bill returned to the cottage.

“This is all your fault, Mr. Remmer!” Mona shouted, clicking her tongue at Bill as he set his wheelbarrow aside. “I told you that you needed to raise her to be a well-mannered young lady. Having raised three daughters myself, I thought you would've listened to my advice, but you ignored it, and look at her now! To think, a fully-grown adult, not to mention a teacher who's supposed to be a role model for children, climbing trees!”

Looking perplexed, Bill shouted back, “Is there a law against schoolteachers climbing trees? I thought a good teacher should know how to do everything!”

Ever since Layla had first come to stay at Arvis, Bill and Mona had been arguing about the proper way to raise her.

Layla thought about telling them that she was an adult now and they didn't need to worry about her anymore, then decided against it and hesitantly approached Bill.

“Look at her!” Mona shouted. “It's your fault, Bill. You should've spanked her when she was younger. Then maybe she wouldn't have become such a tomboy!”

At this frightening comment, Layla flinched and reached for her bottom. Bill also froze in place as if he were being punished for

doing something wrong.

Mona kept nagging Bill for a short while longer, then, suddenly remembering the reason she had come over, handed them a basket full of snacks and left. Bill and Layla remained motionless for a second, then glanced at each other and burst into laughter.

“I feel like I've been spanked, just from her words,” she said.

“This is no good, Layla. From now on, you should try not to let her find out when you're climbing trees. I'm worried I'm going to go deaf from all her nagging.”

“Sure, I'll do that for you, Uncle Bill.” She lifted the heavy basket and walked towards the cottage. The old bag on her shoulder rattled with each step she took.

“Anyway, that old bag needs to be thrown in the incinerator soon.” Bill had resolved to throw away the bag many times but could never bring himself to. He flashed a relieved yet bitter smile.

Despite Bill's worries, Layla was living life to the fullest. When the new semester started, she started working as a rookie teacher. She had made the occasional mistake, but she never felt discouraged for long. Instead, she always used her mistakes as opportunities to improve.

By now, she seemed to be having a lot of fun teaching at the school. Bill had worried at first since he still saw her as a child. But soon he saw that he didn't need to worry about her competence. However, he knew that she still harbored a sad wound deep inside her.

He suspected that her refusal to throw away the bag was because she associated it with the lost happy days of her younger years. He knew better than anyone how much Kyle meant to her. They had been best friends before she had become his first love. He had been like family to her. The pain of losing him wouldn't heal quickly. He knew that she would need more time.

*Not yet,* he thought, sliding the letter that had come from Kyle deep into his pocket.

Even after moving to Ratse, Kyle had sent a letter to Layla every

week. The mailman had delivered these letters specifically to Bill. Bill had requested this, and the mailman had readily complied.

Bill knew this was cowardly and cruel of him. He knew it wasn't mature. But despite the guilt he felt towards Kyle, he considered it more important to protect Layla's feelings.

“Uncle Bill!” she shouted from her seat on the porch, waving at him.

Smiling bashfully, he walked over to her.

They sat next to each other, sharing an apple as they enjoyed the cool breeze. The forest had taken on a majestic, autumnal color palette.

“Oh, by the way,” she said, “I need to see the butler about something. Would you be able to talk to him for me?”

“The butler? You mean Hessen?”

“Yes. It's about my work at the school.” She pulled a handkerchief out of her apron and wiped the juice from her fingers. “I'd like to see if it would be all right for me to bring my students to Arvis's forest for an autumn field trip.”

“Ah, yes. Hessen will be able to ask the higher-ups and let us know if it's all right. I'll talk to him for you.”

“I'm a little worried they'll think it's a rude request.”

“Rude? The duke's mother and grandmother are very generous about things like that. I'm sure they'll allow it. Especially since they're sponsors of the school.”

“Sponsors?” she asked, looking surprised. “The Herhardt family sponsors the school where I teach?”

“You didn't know that?” he casually asked. “The House of Herhardt sponsors practically every school in the district.”

“I see...” she quietly muttered. Suddenly, the duke's face flashed into her mind, so she shut her eyes to try to get rid of the image.

Sometimes she got the feeling that wherever she went in Karlsbar, she could never escape the name “Herhardt.” Of course, it wasn't just a feeling. It was reality.

*The King of Karlsbar*—that was the nickname the people of the

city had bestowed on Duke Herhardt.

The House of Herhardt was an aristocratic family of the highest rank, with wealth and power comparable to that of the imperial family itself. They were a source of pride for the people of Karlsbar and held great symbolic significance.

“What's the matter?” Bill asked. “Did something happen between you and the Herhardts? Is the duke's bratty fiancée bothering you again?”

Startled by his question, she shook her head. “No, not at all.” Once again, her thoughts were overtaken by images of the duke's face, his eyes, and the various excruciating experiences she had had with him. She didn't feel like she could tell Bill about this, though, so she simply said, “Let's have a cup of tea, Uncle Bill.”

Before he had a chance to reply, she had bolted up from her seat and hurried to the kitchen. She poured the tea into two cups, and she put some of the pastries Mona had brought onto a plate.

The days were getting shorter, so it was already dim inside the house, but she didn't switch on the lamp. It was almost as if she wanted to hide her worries in the dark.

* * *

*There's no need to rush.* Such was Matthias's feeling about Layla Llewellyn. He intended to have her for himself, but he felt no need to be hasty about it.

“Looks like Miss Llewellyn is coming this way,” said Matthias's assistant, Mark Evers, chuckling as he noticed Layla walking down Platanus Road with her students.

Ever since Layla had established herself as a respectable adult and schoolteacher, the residents of Arvis had started addressing her as *Miss Llewellyn*.

“They must be having their field trip today,” the chauffeur added.

Matthias's grandmother had granted permission for the children from the village school to have an autumn field trip at Arvis. His mother had also agreed that it would be fine. Such matters were

traditionally up to the lady of the house, so Matthias had respected their judgment.

Layla was surrounded by elementary-school students as small as she had been when she first arrived at Arvis. She still enjoyed exploring the forest like a child during her free time, but in front of her students, she behaved like a mature adult.

Matthias let out a silent chuckle as he gazed at her through the car window. The car soon passed by Layla and the children, but the image of Layla stuck in his mind for a long while afterward.

Recently, messing with Layla Llewellyn had become his favorite pastime. The more ways he contrived of ingeniously tormenting her, the more lively her reactions became. Her emotions at these points were limited to embarrassment, anger, shame, and fear, but he didn't worry himself about such labels. He enjoyed seeing her become flustered, get upset, and talk back to him much more than seeing her obediently smile.

The previous weekend, he had run into her in the greenhouse when she was helping Bill Remmer tend to the greenhouse's flowerbeds. She had been so startled by the sight of Matthias that she had dropped the basket she was holding, and the dirt-covered flower bulbs had tumbled across the stone floor. Bill had been busy tending to another flower bed on the other end of the greenhouse and hadn't noticed the commotion.

Matthias had calmly approached and stood in front of Layla. When he started kicking some of the bulbs towards her, Layla had looked angrily up at him. She had seemed nervous, perhaps worried that someone would see, but her eyes were full of defiance.

He had chuckled to himself at the thought that everyone else saw her as a kind, tenderhearted woman who would never speak ill of anyone. It was a nice feeling. Having never learned to share with others, he appreciated that Layla seemed to save her anger for him alone.

The beautiful birds that lived in Arvis's heaven, as the greenhouse was called, had been chirping loudly. After taking a few deep

breaths, Layla had quickly gathered up the bulbs, put them back in the basket, and stood up.

She curtsied and was about to run off when he had impulsively decided to trip her. She had staggered, losing her grip on the basket, and the bulbs had once again tumbled across the floor. But she hadn't fallen. Before she could, he had wrapped his arms around her waist to catch her.

Putting her hands over her mouth to stop herself from screaming, she had flailed about frantically. Even though it was well past the rose season, he had detected a hint of rose scent coming from her.

He had then let her go, taken a step back, and nodded towards the bulbs on the floor. She had frowned severely in response to this, her eyes full of reluctance. But she had had no choice but to follow his command.

Biting her lip, she had stooped down again to pick up the bulbs. Once again, he had kicked some of them towards her. Her cheeks had flushed red. It was a pretty color.

He would have been pleased to see her whole body flushed that color. *What a nice color,* he thought. *My color.*

“What's my afternoon schedule today?” he asked as the car approached downtown.

“Just the meeting with the board of directors, Your Grace.”

He liked this answer.

Checking his wristwatch, he nodded. He'd be back at Arvis by early afternoon at the latest. Getting out of the car, he looked up at the cloudless sky. The sunlight was warm and the breeze was cool.

It was the perfect weather for an autumn field trip.

# Chapter 45:
## Princess Teacher

“Is th-that Miss Llewellyn's Dad?” a small boy asked in a nervous voice.

“No way! He looks nothing like her!” an even smaller girl replied, whimpering.

The other children gathered behind Layla were reacting similarly, recoiling with fright at the sight of Bill and soon hiding behind their teacher.

Bill was used to this reaction, so he paid it no mind. He found rowdy children irritating, but he had agreed to spend time with them today at Layla's request and had agreed to guide them through the woods for their special field trip. He could already tell it wasn't going to be an easy job.

“Now, children, this is Uncle Bill, and he's a very nice man,” Layla said, trying to allay the students' fears.

Bill flashed a toothy smile. The whimpering little girl burst into tears at the sight.

“Dammit! What did I do to make her-”

“Uncle Bill!” Layla whispered, cutting off Bill's words before he could swear again. She then crouched down in front of the crying girl and hugged her.

Bill, worried that either a smile or a frown might further scare the children, gazed at them with an ambiguous expression on his face.

Once the girl stopped crying, Layla continued speaking to the group. “Uncle Bill is a very nice man, and he's going to show us around the forest. The forest is filled with different kinds of flowers and trees, and we're going to learn about them with him. Sounds like fun, right?”

The children's faces looked skeptical, but they nodded obediently.

*What a bunch of annoying brats,* Bill thought. Shaking his head, he

took the lead and started walking down the forest path.

Layla and the children followed right behind.

“Come to think of it, you were about their age when you first came here,” Bill said, smiling fondly as the thought occurred to him.

“No, Uncle Bill. These kids are all under ten years old,” Layla replied, frowning slightly. “I was eleven when I got here, and I turned twelve soon after arriving.” Her words sounded lighthearted enough, but her face and tone of voice were serious. Much like how back when she was young, she would stand on her tiptoes when telling someone her age.

Bill chuckled warmly, just as he had back in those days. It warmed his heart to look at the fully-grown Layla and see traces of that little girl who had so hated to be called little.

* * *

Matthias got back to the estate at about one in the afternoon. His car passed by the mansion and headed down the road leading to his riverside cabin. His assistant and the chauffeur were surprised by the unprecedented command, but once they remembered that the students from the village school were having their field trip that day, it made more sense. This sort of charity event was mainly the purview of his mother and grandmother, but there was no reason why the duke couldn't show his face as well.

Emerging from the forest, the car was met with bright sunlight as it reached the riverside. It drove down the riverside path, with the beautiful autumnal colors of the leaves on one side and the shimmering surface of the river on the other. Arvis boasted magnificent scenery during all four seasons, but everyone acknowledged that it was most beautiful during autumn.

The view out the car window felt unfamiliar to Matthias, even though it was his own estate. He was used to seeing Arvis full of lush, green foliage in the summer or covered with snow in the winter. When he was twelve, his father died, and he succeeded him

as duke. At the end of that summer, he started attending boarding school in the capital. From then on, he had spent his springs and autumns in Ratse and his summers and winters in Karlsbar. His life had been split between two cities.

“It's been a long time since you've been in Karlsbar in the fall, hasn't it, Your Grace?” the chauffeur asked, having noticed him looking so intently out the window.

“Yes, it has been,” he replied with a smile on his face that resembled the autumn sunlight.

He thought back to the last autumn he had spent in Arvis when he was eleven. Much time had passed since then, but his life didn't feel especially different now.

He had been raised since birth as the family heir. Accordingly, he had become Duke Herhardt. This had happened earlier than expected, but it was still one of the pre-ordained steps of his life. The future would likely continue to unfold in a predictable manner. He and Claudine would have a son who would live a similar life as the future Duke Herhardt, just as Matthias's life had resembled his father's.

Eventually, he turned his gaze away from the unfamiliar autumnal scenery, and the car came to a stop at the dock where the cabin was located. As soon as the chauffeur opened the back door, the sound of children laughing and playing flooded into the car.

Matthias stepped out of the car and looked in the direction the sound was coming from. The children he had seen in the morning were walking along the bank of the river.

His gaze passed over the gardener walking behind them and came to rest on Layla, who was smiling as brightly as the sunlight that autumn afternoon. Before long, she noticed him as well. She was wearing a blouse with a wide, lacy collar, and a maple-red skirt. It was a great outfit for a teacher. Of course, her bearing was awkward other than the outfit.

Buttoning up his coat, Matthias strode forward through the autumn light.

* * *

“Oh my! That's Duke Herhardt, isn't it?” Mrs. Graeber asked, looking at Matthias approaching. She was an upper-class homeroom teacher at the village school, and she was also the mother of two children. Before Layla could reply, Mrs. Graeber excitedly whispered, “This is my first time seeing him up close like this! He's much more handsome in person than when you see his picture in the newspaper.”

Mrs. Graeber's reaction made Layla become aware of just how famous Duke Herhardt was. To the people of Karlsbar, he was the illustrious, well-respected Duke of Arvis, whose picture appeared often in the newspaper. This was the consensus view of him, even if to Layla he was nothing more than a psychopath.

“But Miss Llewellyn...” Mrs. Graeber started to say.

Just then, the duke came to a stop in front of them.

Bill, who had been arguing with the children, rushed over to greet him. “Hello, Your Grace.”

Mrs. Graeber greeted him as well. Layla, who was still bitter over the humiliation she had suffered the previous weekend, lowered her head belatedly.

*I should've thrown those flower bulbs at him!* she had thought on her walk home from the greenhouse. Of course, even if she could turn back time, she wouldn't have dared do something so brash, but fantasizing about it helped to quell her frustration.

“Would you mind introducing me to this Lady, Miss Llewellyn?” Matthias politely asked as soon as Layla lifted her head.

Layla was taken aback by his dignified, courteous manner. It was like she was looking at a total stranger. She realized with amazement that this was probably the way others saw him all the time.

“Uh, Layla?” Bill said, tapping her on the shoulder.

“What? Ah... yes. Your Grace,” she said. Snapping out of her daze, she politely clasped her hands together under her navel. She resolved not to allow herself to be overcome by bitterness over not

having been able to throw the flower bulbs at him at the greenhouse. She needed to let the duke see that she was a respectable adult now, not a little kid playing in the forest that he could torment as he pleased.

Maintaining a very mature face and voice, she introduced Mrs. Graeber to him. She also gently explained to the children, whose curiosity was evident, what kind of person Duke Herhardt was. Rather than telling them how she really felt about him, she just described him in terms of his established public persona. To tell them her true feelings about him would have necessitated using bad words that children shouldn't hear.

“Thank you so much for allowing us to have this autumn field trip, Your Grace,” she said, feeling proud of what a good job she was doing. Raising her chin slightly and straightening her shoulders, she added, “The students are having a wonderful time, thanks to you.” She emphasized the word *students* to remind him that she was a teacher.

“Really?” Matthias asked, smirking. “You seem to be the one who's having the most fun.”

“Pardon…?” she asked, thoroughly confused by his response.

Matthias made no reply, however, only chuckling briefly. He then bid farewell to Mrs. Graeber and the children, still hiding his twisted personality under a veneer of gentlemanly elegance.

As he started to walk away, his assistant and his chauffeur followed behind him. Layla stared intently at the three men walking towards the riverside cabin.

The meaning of his inscrutable comment was finally revealed to her by Mrs. Graeber. “Um, Miss Llewellyn?”

“Yes?”

“Your head...”

“What...?”

Mrs. Graeber was looking at the top of Layla's head with a look of slight embarrassment.

“My head? What's the matter with my...” She felt at the top of her

head, and suddenly her face sank as she recognized the soft texture of several flower petals. She realized with a shock that she had been wearing a crown of flowers the whole time.

Monica, Layla's youngest student, who was always following her around, had gathered some of the wildflowers Bill had pointed out and woven them into a crown that she had placed on her head.

“I was about to tell you, but then the duke suddenly showed up, so...” Mrs. Graeber apologetically explained.

Layla stared into space, feeling mortified. *So I was trying to act all grown-up while this childish thing was on my head?* She felt the urge to shout some of the swear words that Bill often used, but she stopped herself for the children's sake.

“It's okay, Miss Llewellyn,” Monica said, smiling contently. “You look pretty! Like a princess!”

The other children nodded in agreement.

Bill guffawed as he watched.

Layla was used to hearing his laughter at times when she was frustrated. If it were possible to die of shame, she was ready to lie down for her eternal rest on this beautiful autumn afternoon.

“There's nothing to be ashamed of,” Bill said, laughing heartily as he patted her on the back. “It's just a little embarrassing, but it's not like you committed a crime or something.”

Finding his words not the least bit comforting, Layla's cheeks were as red as ripe apples. Then something even worse happened.

“Mr. Remmer! Miss Llewellyn!” shouted Mark Evers, the duke's assistant, smiling brightly as he returned from the cabin. “His Grace would like to invite the children to his cabin for tea. The three adults are invited as well, of course.”

Immediately the group of students erupted into a roar of excitement.

Mrs. Graeber was smiling from ear to ear, and even Bill looked pleased.

Amid everyone else's joy, Layla stared up into the sky, clutching the flower crown on her head. Even if shame couldn't kill a person,

she hoped that it could at least knock her out for a while. As she focused on this hope, her mind was as clear as the blue autumn sky.

# Chapter 46:
## The Moment Their Eyes Met

The children's incessant chattering and laughter ceased the moment they stepped inside the cabin. Looking around the interior with wonder, they didn't dare talk or play around. Layla had to comfort the frightened Monica, so she was the last to enter the cabin.

The servants greeted the duke's young guests with the same courtesy they would have extended to VIPs. “This way, please,” one of the servants said, guiding the children to the drawing room.

The duke was sitting in a chair with his back to the window that looked out onto the river. For Layla, the cabin was filled with frightening, embarrassing memories, and she found herself holding her breath as she entered.

“Thank you so much for your generosity, Your Grace,” Mrs. Graeber said excitedly. “It was already so kind of you to allow us to visit Arvis today, and we feel even more grateful that you've invited us into your cabin as well.”

Layla felt very relieved by the active role Mrs. Graeber was taking. If she continued to position herself as the duke's conversational partner, then Layla could stay silent in the background, like a piece of furniture.

“I'm the one who should be thanking you for accepting my sudden invitation,” the duke said, slowly rising from his seat. Because he was backlit by the window behind him, his face was obscured by shadow. This only made his presence more palpable, however.

“Miss Llewellyn, it hurts,” Monica whispered.

Layla, who had been staring blankly at Matthias's silhouette, looked down at Monica.

“You're hurting my hand,” she muttered.

Layla realized with a start that she had been squeezing the little

girl's hand very tightly. “Oh my, I'm so sorry, Monica,” she said, rubbing her hand.

Meanwhile, the door that let out onto the balcony was opened.

Layla turned her head at the smell of the fishy breeze wafting in from the river. She saw that on the sunny balcony there was a tea table with full place settings. The white tablecloth fluttered gently in the breeze.

Shifting his gaze from Layla to Mrs. Graeber, the duke extended his hand to her and asked, “Shall we?”

Blushing, Mrs. Graeber gently placed her hand in his and they walked out onto the balcony.

The children, who had never experienced a teatime like this before, eagerly followed behind. Holding Monica's hand with a gentler grip than before, Layla was once again the last through the door.

“It feels like we've really become princesses, Miss Llewellyn!” Monica exclaimed as she looked around the balcony with wonder.

Layla nodded in agreement. The tea table was set with such lavish decoration, it was hard to believe that it hadn't been planned in advance.

Layla's gaze moved from the centerpiece, which was made from red asters and white laceflowers to the teacups and utensils, which seemed excessively ornate for these village schoolchildren. She then looked beyond the balcony's railing at the Schulter River shimmering below.

A bright beam of sunlight reflected dazzlingly off the thin frames of her glasses, drawing Matthias's attention.

The blue river. The white sunlight. The red forest. Amid these beautiful, autumnal colors, Matthias and Layla locked eyes.

* * *

Monica continued to be amazed by everything she encountered. She rejoiced over how pretty the cabin and the scenery were, how nice the duke was, how delicious the cake was, and countless other

things. “Wow!” she exclaimed as a bowl of ice cream was placed in front of her. After taking a bite, she turned to Layla and solemnly whispered, “It's like I'm eating a cloud, Miss Llewellyn!”

It took Layla a few seconds to understand what Monica was saying. With a smile, she took a napkin and wiped the ice cream from Monica's lips.

This was Monica's first year of school. She was smaller and more timid than her peers, so she had trouble fitting in. For the first few weeks of school, she had cried every day and whined that she wanted to go home. She was such a handful, it made Layla want to cry right along with her.

She didn't cry as often anymore, but she still followed Layla around more than anyone else in the class. After she learned that Monica's mother had passed away the previous spring, she felt like she understood her feelings a little better.

“You should try some too, Miss Llewellyn.”

Layla felt tempted but decided to be an adult about it. “No, Monica. I'm fine.”

There was no rule that said adults couldn't eat ice cream, but the ice cream at this table had only been served to the children. She didn't want the duke to see her eating it.

Taking a sip of the now-lukewarm tea, she started listening to the conversation going on across the table and was glad to hear that Mrs. Graeber was still actively leading it.

Glancing at the duke, who was sitting at the head of the table, she observed that he was listening intently to Mrs. Graeber. Through his brief replies and a polite smile, he was displaying utmost etiquette. Remarkably, through this perfect etiquette, he was showcasing his dominance over everyone. He had an air of highly-refined arrogance.

While Layla's attention was fixed on the duke, whom she was observing like a scientist observing a specimen, Monica bolted up from her seat and held her ice cream bowl out towards her. “Miss Llewellyn, Miss Llewellyn. It tastes so good! Please try some, okay?”

As Monica tugged on her sleeve, Layla flinched, causing Monica to drop the bowl, spilling ice cream all over Layla's skirt before the bowl fell to the balcony's hardwood floor. The clamor drew the attention of everyone at the table.

“I'm s-sorry, Miss Llewellyn!” shouted Monica, looking frightfully at the mess she had caused.

“I'm fine, don't worry,” Layla said, smiling at Monica. She then hurriedly grabbed a napkin and started wiping her skirt.

A few maids soon arrived and quickly cleaned up the floor.

Seeing that Layla was staring at her sticky hands and stained skirt, Matthias nodded at the maid standing closest to her. Grasping her master's intention at once, the maid escorted Layla to the powder room.

With her teacher gone, Monica was about to burst into tears, but luckily Bill swooped in to comfort her just in time. Just then, the duke's assistant showed up. “Your Grace, Count Klein would like to talk to you on the phone.”

* * *

The more Layla rubbed the ice cream stain, the deeper it became. Soon she gave up and just washed her hands. Luckily the skirt was a dark color, so the stain wasn't too noticeable.

She cautiously turned off the sink's golden faucet and inspected her appearance in the mirror. Her cheeks were slightly flushed from the frantic effort she had put forth trying to get rid of the stain.

She tidied her hair, took a deep breath, and walked out of the powder room. However, she only made it a few steps before she flinched and stopped in her tracks. The duke was leaning against the wall in the hallway leading back to the drawing room. The moment she flinched, Duke Herhardt looked up.

*Oh no,* she thought, frowning as she looked around, worrying that he was going to do something again. *Don't tell me that he was waiting for me.*

Quite a bit of time passed, but he remained right where he was,

calmly looking at her.

His lips displayed an ungentlemanly sneer, a sneer that those who praised him as a perfect aristocrat would never see. Whenever he sneered like that, something bad happened to Layla.

Feeling an ominous sense of foreboding, she clasped her hands together and gulped nervously. She felt like silently waiting until he moved aside, but she worried that doing so would create an unnecessary misunderstanding.

Still keeping her guard up, she started cautiously walking forward, one step at a time. He kept leaning against the wall, watching her, until she was about to pass by him. Then he stepped into the middle of the hallway, blocking her path. Startled, she jumped back, at which he chuckled derisively.

After his short phone call with Count Klein, he had decided against going straight back to the balcony and had gone the other direction instead. He hadn't had any particular plan in mind. He had simply had the urge to wait for Layla since she still hadn't returned from the powder room. He had figured that something interesting might happen, and it had.

With a serious look on her face, Layla started resolutely walking forward again, like a soldier marching into battle. She seemed to intend to walk past him, but the cabin's hallway wasn't wide enough for that.

As she neared him again, he stuck out his foot. Luckily, she was already looking down, and she reflexively jumped out of the way. *Missed me!* she thought, feeling relieved.

Her relief quickly turned into shame, however, when he deftly placed his foot down in a different spot. He hadn't been trying to trip her. He had seemed like he was, but he was actually just casually changing his posture. Thus, Layla jumped like a scared rabbit for nothing in front of the gracefully standing duke.

He quietly snickered, then turned around as if nothing had happened. She stood in place until he had made it to the drawing room.

She knew that if she told anyone about the childish way he was acting, they would call her a liar.

Shaking her head, she straightened her posture and walked towards the drawing room. She returned to the balcony and was annoyed to see Duke Herhardt looking like a perfect gentleman again. He was having a friendly chat with Mrs. Graeber.

“You came back just in time, Miss Llewellyn!” Mrs. Graeber said when she saw her. “Let's go boating!”

“Boating?”

“His Grace said he'd let our students go for a ride in his boat. Riding in a boat on that beautiful river, doesn't that sound like fun?”

“Uh... but I...”

While Layla was struggling to come up with a reply, Bill stepped in. “I'm sorry, Your Grace, but Layla has a fear of water. She can't ride on boats.”

“Ah, I see,” the duke replied in a regretful tone, looking at Layla. Of course, a year earlier he had seen her almost drown in the same river, but he pretended to be learning of her fear of water for the first time. “Then Miss Llewellyn can stay here and rest.”

*Why is he showing me so much consideration?* She wondered. Meanwhile, the children scurried inside, following a servant.

“Yes, Miss Llewellyn. I'll go, so you can stay here,” Mrs. Graeber said.

“Yep, don't worry, Layla. I'll look after those rascals,” Bill added, chuckling as he grabbed Monica's hand.

While at first Monica had almost cried at the mere sight of Bill, she now gladly went along with him.

“Thank you, Mrs. Graeber. And thanks, Uncle Bill,” Layla said, feeling embarrassed. Unlike the duplicitous duke, she knew that Mrs. Graeber and Bill were good people.

She also felt lucky that, since she wasn't going on the boat, she was going to be far away from the duke.

*But why isn't he standing up?* She wondered, noticing that he was

still seated even after everyone else had left.

Only then did it occur to her that of course, the duke wasn't going to go out in a boat with a bunch of schoolchildren.

Realizing she had made a huge mistake, she bolted up from her seat, only to see two boats filled with children drifting out of the boathouse down below. The servants were rowing while Bill and Mrs. Graeber were looking after the children.

“It's Miss Llewellyn! Miss Llewellyn! Miss Llewellyn!”

The children laughed and waved when they saw her standing in front of the balcony's railing.

“See you after our boat trip, Miss Llewellyn!” Even the timid Monica was smiling excitedly.

Just as Layla was realizing with despair that it was too late to catch up with the children, she heard a voice as cold as the river's breeze.

“Sit down.”

Startled, she turned around. The duke was sitting with his legs crossed, looking at her. “Layla,” he said in a singsong manner, smiling.

# Chapter 47:
## The Duke Laughed

A white pigeon flew over from across the river.

“Phoebe...?” Layla muttered in disbelief. The bird landed on the balcony railing, and she got a better look at it. It had a red string tied to its leg. It was clearly Phoebe, her messenger pigeon. “Phoebe! What are you doing here?” she asked, approaching the railing.

After Kyle left, Phoebe's role as a letter carrier had ended, and she had been living simply as Layla's beloved pet. On days the duke went bird hunting, Layla had to lock her up in her cage, but otherwise, she was able to rove freely through the Arvis forest.

“You can't come here, Phoebe. This place is...” Layla glanced warily in the duke's direction.

He was looking at the boats the children were riding on in the river, but he turned to look back at Layla. “Phoebe?”

Hearing him say the bird's name made her flinch.

“So, the bird's name is Phoebe, huh?”

“Do you know Phoebe, Your Grace?”

“Well,” he replied, cocking his head slightly. “Why don't you ask her?”

“Pardon?”

“You claim to understand birds' minds, right?”

“That's...” She trailed off, furrowing her brow.

Matthias found it quite satisfying to see her biting her lip because she couldn't think of a good response.

As if worried that he would be able to hear, she turned her back to him and whispered a few words to the bird. It was as if she could really communicate with the bird. Even without hearing what she said, he could tell that it wasn't anything good.

The bird immediately flew back across the river. Once it was out of sight, Layla went back to her seat and sat down. She still seemed

quite wary of Matthias. “I'm sorry, Your Grace,” she abruptly said. “I apologize on Phoebe's behalf for her coming here recklessly like that.”

“You're apologizing on the bird's behalf?” he scoffed.

“Yes,” she replied with a serious look on her face. “I don't know why she came here, but I'll try to train her never to do it again. So, Your Grace...” Her voice started shaking. “Please don't shoot Phoebe.” The doubt and confusion were gone from her eyes; only fear remained.

As he silently observed her fear, the smirk faded from his lips.

As the silence continued, her voice grew more desperate. “Please. I know that you’re the owner of Arvis, but please don't...” Her pride was taking a hit, but she continued to plead.

Just then, a servant arrived. Layla put on a brave face and tried to hide her quivering lip.

The servant informed the duke that one of the family's company's lawyers was on the phone. The duke left the balcony to take the call. Layla kept her eye on him through the window the whole time. As she looked at him, images kept flashing into her mind of all the countless birds he had gruesomely killed. She knew she wouldn't feel all right until he promised that he would not shoot Phoebe.

He soon returned. Having previously avoided making eye contact with him whenever possible, today she kept her eyes firmly locked on his.

“Your Grace, Phoebe-”

“I'm not interested in your bird,” he bluntly said, irritated by her pleas.

She was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“I don't like to hunt game that doesn't try to escape. It's boring.”

Her eyes began to brighten with cautious hope. “So, you're not going to shoot her?” she asked, still looking straight at him.

This was the longest they had maintained eye contact since she had first come to Arvis.

“What do you think?” he asked, not averting his gaze either.

He had no intention of shooting the messenger pigeon, but he didn't feel like giving a direct answer, either. This was the first time he had seen her willingly begging him for something.

“I think you won't shoot her,” she replied.

“Why not?”

“Because... you're a gentleman.”

*You only call me a gentleman when you're speaking about something you don't like,* he thought, chuckling at her bold reply.

Sensing his uneasiness, she hastily added, “And I don't think you'd practice a form of hunting that you find boring.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she replied, nodding. “I expect no less from Karlsbar's greatest marksman and greatest gentleman.”

Matthias burst into laughter. The servants standing off to the side looked at each other with widened eyes. Mark Evers, the duke's most trusted assistant, looked the most surprised of all.

Duke Herhardt was not known to laugh very often. When he did laugh, it was rarely more than a polite chuckle or a quiet snicker. To the best of Mark Evers's memory, the duke hadn't even laughed this much when he was a young boy.

The boats, which had been traveling downstream, turned back towards the cabin. The sound of the children's excited laughter blended with the soft sound of the duke's laughter.

Layla was still looking pleadingly at him, hoping that he would give his word about not shooting Phoebe, but he continued not to. All he did was look at her nervously quivering lip.

Finally, she said, “So... Your Grace?” Her eyes and voice were shaking, Her eyes and voice were shaking, but unlike usual, she didn't seem frightened.

He liked the look of her cheeks, which were rosy with cautious expectation. He also liked the focused look in her eyes, as if she were determined not to miss the slightest shift in his face or posture.

He changed his mind about responding to her and instead rang

his servant bell. After receiving a short command from him, a servant hurried to the drawing room and came back with a cigarette case and an ashtray.

“Your Grace?” Layla repeated. She didn't want to irritate him, but she needed an answer. She had raised Phoebe from the time she was a chick covered with down. Most importantly, in her mind, Phoebe symbolized the wonderful times she and Kyle had spent together. She knew those times would never return, so she hoped at least not to have to lose Phoebe as well.

Matthias took a cigarette out of the case and lit it. A thin line of smoke drifted upward amid the silence. He looked at Layla through the smoke. He didn't mind the pleading look on her face as she kept her eyes locked on him. He even had the absurd, pathetic thought that he wouldn't mind if this moment were to continue forever.

But he knew he needed to bring it to a stop. He gave a slight nod.

Her eyes filled with joy. “So you really won't shoot Phoebe?” She was quite persistent, having been deceived many times in the past.

He looked away from her and flicked the ash from his cigarette. Watching this action closely, Layla finally relaxed.

If it had just been the two of them, she would have found it hard to trust him, but there were attendants present as well. It didn't seem likely that he would break a promise that others had seen him making. She felt she could be certain enough of that, even though she didn't know Matthias von Herhardt well, nor did she want to.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she looked across the river. The forest's autumn leaves were reflected in the gently flowing water. A smile spread across her lips. Phoebe, and her precious memories, were safe. Her smile brightened as her feeling of relief increased.

Matthias's eyes narrowed at the expression on her face. *Why is she so happy about guaranteeing the safety of a mere pigeon?* He didn't understand it, but still, he couldn’t take his eyes off her face.

The cigarette he was holding between his long fingers slowly burned. An unidentifiable sense of irritation and uneasiness flowed along with the smoke. It felt both like hunger and satiation at once.

The strange, uncomfortable feeling was as vivid as the autumnal colors surrounding him and as vague as the dream he had had the previous night, which he had forgotten the moment he woke up.

He gently tossed the cigarette into the ashtray. He felt thirsty from smoking the cigarette, which he hadn't even enjoyed, but rather than having a glass of water, he took another cigarette out of the case. The tip of the cigarette shook in the breeze as he held it unlit between his fingers.

Feeling his gaze, Layla turned her head towards him. The sun was shining on her, and there was still a smile on her face. The emotion she was feeling shone more vividly than her anger, fear, humiliation, or tears ever had.

As he tried to discern the name of the emotion he was viewing, she quickly stopped smiling. She awkwardly averted her eyes, then lowered her head. She was just staring at her fingers, but Matthias felt a deep sense of humiliation. *Humiliation.* He knew that emotion now, thanks to her.

*Look at you,* he thought, chuckling to himself. *Now that you've achieved your goal, you don't feel the need to curry favor with me anymore, is that it? I didn't realize you were capable of such devious behavior, Layla. It's rather cute, even if I feel a bit embarrassed. Though I don't like the way your emotions shift so quickly.* He crushed the unlit cigarette between his fingers and tossed it into the ashtray.

The sunny smiles had been replaced by dark shade. He didn't like that at all.

* * *

The autumn field trip came to an end as the children were taken back to the school, from which they were safely sent home. Only then did Layla realize how tense she had been all day when a feeling of fatigue swept over her whole body. Even so, she was happy with how her first field trip had gone. She had been most worried that Duke Herhardt would somehow ruin the field trip. Ironically, however, he had turned out to be the key to its success.

“I think Lady Claudine is going to be the most envied lady in the world for quite a while,” Mrs. Graeber said in a wistful tone as they walked together. “She'll have that handsome man as her husband and the Arvis estate as her home. At times like this, I really feel like life's not fair. By the way, do you know when they're getting married?”

“I think I heard it was going to be sometime next summer.”

“The whole empire will be talking about the wedding, I'm sure. Ugh, I'm so jealous.”

Layla responded to Mrs. Graeber’s exaggerated lament with restrained laughter.

They parted ways at a crossroads downtown. Layla headed back to Arvis after purchasing an armful of groceries. She wanted to make a delicious dinner for Bill to thank him for all the help he had provided, so she had bought ingredients for some of his favorite dishes.

Excited to get started on the meal, she started walking faster. By the time she reached the road leading to Arvis, she was practically running. When she was about halfway down the road, however, she suddenly stopped. A middle-aged woman who was crossing the road towards her stopped at the same moment. Her eyes looked just like Kyle’s—it was Mrs. Ettman.

Layla's hands turned white as she gripped the grocery bags tighter. She had no idea what to do. It would be ridiculous to pretend not to see her, but it would be equally ridiculous to bid her a casual hello.

Ultimately, she just silently bowed her head at the woman. Mrs. Ettman accepted her greeting by silently nodding back at her.

Then, just as the excruciatingly awkward moment seemed about to pass, she opened her mouth. “Layla.”

Layla stopped mid-step and turned to look at her.

“Even with how everything ended up, I don't regret it,” she said, staring straight at Layla. There was neither hostility nor guilt in her eyes—her stare looked as dead as a pile of dry leaves. “My

reputation is ruined, as is my relationship with Kyle, but I managed to stop your marriage, so it's all worth it to me."

Layla would have actually found these words easier to take if they had been uttered in a more hostile tone.

As Mrs. Ettman spoke in a calm, tired voice, each word she said pierced Layla's heart. Once she was done speaking, she started walking again and brushed past Layla. Mrs. Ettman's housekeeper, who had been standing a short distance away with a flustered look on her face, hurried behind her, glancing back briefly to look at Layla with pity.

Layla nodded back at the housekeeper, then hurriedly continued on her way. She walked with long, confident strides. Then, like a wind-up toy whose spring had run down, she stopped again.

*Am I really a person?* she thought. To rid herself of the sudden feeling of shame, she looked at her feet, opened her palms, and took a deep breath.

She gently closed her eyes, then opened them again, and once again started walking towards the cottage where Uncle Bill was waiting.

# Chapter 48:
## Platanus Road

The pigeon gently landed on the balcony's railing, then hopped straight over to the feeder and started pecking away at the seeds inside as the light of the sunset permeated its white feathers.

When he saw the bird through the window, Matthias repeated the name he had heard Layla say in such a desperate tone earlier: "Phoebe." *Why would she give a mere pigeon such a lofty name?* he wondered, snickering at the thought.

He rose from the sofa and opened the door to the balcony. A cold, damp breeze blew in from the river. As he approached the pigeon, it showed no alarm, but only kept pecking away at its feed. The docile bird had quite a different personality from its owner.

The sun continued to set as Matthias leaned against the railing. He shut his eyes and listened to the clear sound of the breeze. He could also hear the quiet, beautiful sound of autumn leaves rustling in the distance.

Signs of autumn pervaded every corner of Arvis, and Layla was there too.

He watched her diligently pedaling her bicycle to work each weekday morning and coming home looking more tired each afternoon. He watched her use her spare time helping the gardener with his work or carrying a basket into the forest, where she gathered mounds of mushrooms and wild berries.

In Arvis, the beautiful world that he possessed, everything was in its right place. The perfect order of his estate brought him great satisfaction, and it helped him to forget the disillusionment that he had felt after becoming an informant to secretly help the desperate Linda Ettman stop her son's wedding.

It was only right, he felt, that Layla should be situated amongst Arvis's perfect order.

Immersed in that pleasant, intoxicating feeling of satisfaction, he

opened his eyes. The pigeon, having eaten its fill, flew off in the direction of the cottage, returning to its owner.

Matthias was now certain that the bird would come back to the cabin's balcony tomorrow and the next day. He had no interest in the bird's feelings, but he knew plenty about how to train it.

To win the messenger pigeon's heart, all he had to do was provide it with ample feed at a safe location. He had learned this technique in the military. Soldiers would use messenger pigeons when there weren't good electronic communications in place or when there was a danger of electronic messages being intercepted by the enemy. Matthias was now using the same training techniques on Phoebe.

After Kyle had left for the capital, Phoebe had quickly realized that it was no use flying to his window anymore. Around that time, a new source of food had appeared at a safe location, so Phoebe had started flying there instead. Unlike its foolish owner, the bird was quite smart.

As he gazed in the direction it was flying off to, Matthias suddenly frowned, as he was reminded of how Layla had looked sitting on the balcony on the day of the autumn field trip, when her smile had faded the moment their eyes had met. He was sure that she had shown the doctor's son that same smile without reserve, and this thought filled him with bitterness.

Ever since she was young, Layla had refrained from smiling in Matthias's presence, but she hadn't been able to hold back her tears. Thus, he had made her cry. If he couldn't make her smile, making her cry would have to do. It didn't matter to him whether she smiled or cried. If all he could give her were tears, he would make her shed tears. If he could give her pain, he would make her hurt inside.

But what if there was something else he could give her? Lately, he had been wondering about that. He was tired of seeing her frightened or angry. Instead, he wanted her to look only at him, occasionally pestering him in baby-talk to give him something, then

erupting into a bright smile when he gave it to her.

He now knew what desire felt like. He desired Layla Llewellyn. He desired everything about her.

* * *

“You've gained some weight, Phoebe!” Layla commented, holding Phoebe in both hands and looking at her from various angles. At first, she thought she had grown a thicker coat of feathers in preparation for winter, but upon closer examination, she had put on some fat. “Is it because it's autumn?”

Despite Layla's persistent questioning, Phoebe simply continued cooing.

“Have you been finding food somewhere else? It can't be from Kyle since he's gone now...” She trailed off.

Whenever Kyle's name came to her mind, her eyes welled up with tears, but she did her best to stop herself from crying. She had promised Kyle that she would take care of herself and had asked him to take care of himself as well. Thus, she had to take care of herself and stay happy. This was just as important as it was to her that Kyle be happy.

She took a deep breath to calm herself down, then set down her chubby bird. Phoebe wandered around the yard for a while, then flew to the far side of the forest.

It was an ordinary day.

Layla diligently finished her morning routine, then said goodbye to Bill and left for work. She rode her bicycle down the road leading out of Arvis, surrounded by beautiful autumn colors.

She turned onto the road the school was on, and several children shouted gleefully, waving to her. “Miss Llewellyn!”

She got down from her bicycle, greeted the children, and went into the school.

It was an ordinary day, and yet she felt a slight feeling of wistfulness. At the same time, however, she felt an even stronger feeling of happiness.

The children were more well-behaved than usual, and they all scored well on their arithmetic and spelling quizzes. The classroom was warm and cozy because they had lit the heater. She had a nice chat with Mrs. Graeber during lunchtime. The sky was a beautiful bright blue, without a single cloud. She couldn't help but smile.

Throughout the day, whenever memories of Kyle floated into her mind, she made herself smile brightly. She continued this as she began riding home at the end of the day. However, once she neared Arvis, there were too many memories of good times she had had on that road with Kyle. Now that she was riding on it alone, the loneliness that she had suppressed throughout the day hit her all at once.

She came to a stop in the middle of the road. She felt foolish. The countless memories evoked by the road coalesced into a dark cloud of regret.

They couldn't live forever like siblings, since they weren't related. Being a man and a woman, they couldn't remain best friends either. Their relationship was doomed to end in separation from the start, and they hadn't even realized it. They loved each other, got hurt, and then...

As she thought about this, her vision began to blur. She shook her head and bit her lip. Closing her eyes, she reminded herself, *He said he would take care of himself. And he said that I should take care of myself too.*

Fortunately, she was able to stop herself from bursting into tears. She got back on her bicycle and started pedaling again.

A black car approached from far away and soon passed by her.

* * *

Matthias had the chauffeur stop the car at the entrance to Platanus Road. Telling his assistant and the chauffeur to go the rest of the way without him, he got out and was left alone on the road, just as he had been on that early-summer day the previous year.

He started walking at a relaxed pace as he awaited the

approaching figure. The leaves rustled under his shoes as he walked. When he heard the sound of a bicycle in the distance, he slowed his pace even more.

Eventually, he could hear what he was sure was Layla coming to a stop a moderate distance behind him. He then turned around, and just as he expected, he saw Layla standing next to her bicycle.

She glanced around for a moment, then curtsied and awkwardly said, “Hello, Your Grace.”

The braided bun in her hair had started to come undone, and the loose strands were swaying in the breeze. He had noticed that she didn't seem to have a talent for doing her hair—it was always either tied up too tightly or, like today, too loosely. He didn't mind her sloppy appearance, however.

He bowed his head at her, putting one hand behind his straightened back. She blinked her widened eyes, gripping her bicycle's handlebars tightly. He hadn't done anything, and yet she had a noticeably uneasy look on her face.

“Well... please excuse me, then,” she said. Curtsying to him once more, she walked her bicycle past him.

Just as she had gotten back onto the bicycle and was about to start pedaling, he said, “You should act like a lady, Layla.”

She stopped.

“You know. If you want me to be a gentleman, then you have to act like a lady.”

She remained in place, not getting down from the bicycle but not pedaling either.

He slowly walked towards her. “And your pigeon will only be safe if I'm a gentleman.”

She turned to face him after he made this comment. After glaring at him for a moment, she got off the bicycle.

He cocked his head slightly as he looked at her. Her moist eyes looked frightened, but the twisted expression on her lips was full of defiant annoyance at this situation. *What an attitude she has,* he thought.

After a moment of staring at her as she trembled over his joking remark about her pigeon, he casually walked past her in the direction of the mansion. She followed behind him, looking at her feet and walking her bicycle with her.

“I didn't tell you to act like you're my maid,” he muttered, glancing over his shoulder.

She looked up with surprise. “Pardon? Ah…”

Despite her stubbornness, she grasped what he was saying. With a reluctant look on her face, she took a few steps closer to him, but she remained one step behind.

With a laugh, he took one step back, thus getting what he wanted. He started to walk again, and she carefully matched his pace. With a bicycle between them, the two walked down Platanus Road, side by side.

They didn't exchange any words as they walked. The only sounds were her bicycle's wheels turning, the leaves crunching under their feet, and the cool breeze blowing through the trees.

He walked quite slowly for how long his legs were. She glanced at him after noticing that there was still a long way to go despite how long they had been walking. He had always been the unhurried type, but today he seemed to be walking particularly slowly. Of course, she realized that she might be feeling this way because of how awkward and uncomfortable the situation was.

He was about the same height as Kyle but was a much more imposing figure than him. Perhaps this was because of his straight, elegant posture, as well as his piercing eyes. As she continued to look at him, she noticed that his frame was bigger and more muscular than Kyle's. Perhaps that was why he seemed more domineering.

As she considered these possible explanations, her gaze gradually moved upward. She observed his pale, smooth hands, his dark-dray coat, his exquisitely-knotted tie, his expressionless lips, and... his eyes.

As she looked at those blue eyes staring back at her, she was hit

with an instinctual feeling of fear. She could have rid herself of the fear by simply lowering her head, but for some reason, she found it hard to do so.

As she stood, transfixed by his eyes, he slowly started to speak.

# Chapter 49:
## Like a Bird's Wings

"That hairstyle doesn't suit you," the duke said.

Layla was taken aback by his comment. It took her a moment to process what he had said. Once she did, she felt even more confused. Why was he making such a remark out of the blue? "Yes," she replied in a cold tone, "I know my hair is a little... unkempt right now."

"A little?" he scoffed, looking her up and down.

She squeezed her bicycle's handlebars tighter, fighting the urge to flee. But she couldn't stop the anger that was welling up inside her. She was embarrassed to feel her cheeks starting to turn red.

"You might as well just wear your hair down," he said.

"I'd like to, but I was told that wouldn't be appropriate for a teacher."

"Who told you that?"

"The principal." She felt her face growing increasingly warmer, so finally, she broke eye contact with the duke. The silence that ensued made her feel even more awkward, so she continued. "Apparently I look too young, so in order to maintain my authority as a teacher, I'm supposed to avoid hairstyles that make me look like a student."

She heard the sound of the duke chuckling amid the sound of the breeze, but she didn't turn back to look at him. Now she felt her ears heating up as well. She was sure she looked ridiculous.

"You're saying that disheveled bun is supposed to bring you authority as a teacher...?" he asked sarcastically. Looking down at her, he was pleased to see a prim expression that suggested her pride had been hurt.

"I'm getting a lot of practice putting up my hair every day, so I'm sure I'll get better at it soon."

*Wow, she never gives in, does she?* He snickered. "Hmm, you think

so?”

“Yes, I do. If I find that I'm unable to improve, I'll cut my hair short.”

“Cut it short?” he asked. The smile left his face and his eyes narrowed.

She nodded solemnly at his brash question. “Yes. That would make me look much more mature, and...”

“Don't cut it,” he calmly said.

Puzzled by what she had just heard, she looked at him and angrily asked, “Do you think I need your permission to cut my hair or let it grow?”

“It's pretty,” he gently replied.

She could hardly believe her ears. She stared at him, and he stared right back, looking utterly calm.

“It's like a bird's wings.”

His voice sounded exactly the same as it did when he was insulting her.

Reflecting on this, she realized that he had always spoken in a soft, gentle tone, even when saying hurtful things to her. This made her think back to the day they had first met. Even on that summer day all those years ago, when she had been terrified after almost being shot by him, his voice had been quiet and gentle, just like now.

She vividly recalled frantically climbing down the tree, running back to the cottage, and shouting to Bill in a panicked voice, *“There's someone in the woods! A tall man! He had black hair and blue eyes, his voice was as smooth as a duck's feathers.”*

In that moment of panic, as she had hurried to find words to describe the duke's voice, the first thing that had come to mind was duck feathers—those soft, iridescent feathers that she had collected as if they were precious gems scattered along the side of the Schulter River.

She quickly averted her eyes again. She would have preferred it if he had simply said something cruel to her. That was the Duke

Herhardt she knew—a frightening, imposing, despicable man.

She kept waiting, but he said nothing more. Instead, he simply walked on, looking at the leaf-strewn road. She started to wonder if the strange compliment she thought she had heard had been her imagination.

She felt at her hair, which had continued to come undone, then shook her head, frowning. Since she had taken her hands off her bicycle's handlebars, it started to sway. She grabbed at the handlebars again, but it was too late; the bicycle fell to the ground, pulling her with it.

The sounds of the bicycle crashing and her crying out echoed through the quiet road.

Matthias looked back at the ridiculous scene, furrowing his brow slightly. Seeing Layla pinned under her bicycle, he couldn't help but chuckle. “You seem to fall a lot,” he said.

She bit her lip. She felt humiliated, and yet, at the same time, she felt relieved. She silently waited for him to ridicule her and leave.

But instead, he just quietly lifted her bicycle up for her. Then he walked over to where her bag had fallen, picked it up, then walked back and crouched down in front of her.

Before he could pick up any more of her scattered belongings, she snatched the bag from him and said, “Don't. I'll get those.”

He raised his eyebrows at her open hostility.

“I... I'll pick up the rest of the things,” she muttered. Looking down, she began to retrieve the things she had dropped.

He noticed that her hands were trembling, even though he hadn't said anything to frighten her.

He felt irritated, but he decided to keep watching her. When he noticed her flushed cheeks and neck, it occurred to him that her hands might just be trembling from embarrassment rather than fear. That wouldn't be so bad.

He stood up again. Under his long shadow, she continued to scramble to pick up everything she had dropped. He realized how distraught she was when he saw that she had also distractedly

picked up some stray pebbles and leaves. This cleared away all the irritation he had been feeling.

After picking everything up and putting it all back in her bag, she stood up and faced him. She seemed to have forgotten about the dirt stains on her clothes and hands.

“I know it's rude, Your Grace, but...” Her eyes darted back and forth between him and the mansion's gate down the road. “...but if it's rude for me to walk ahead of you, I'll wait for you to go ahead first.”

She didn't want to walk with him anymore. Even as she said these bold words, an anxious, uneasy look remained in her eyes.

Despite her irritating attitude, he readily assented to her request. He knew that they couldn't walk together past the gate, anyway.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“Me? I can go first?” she asked, looking surprised.

He nodded.

Looking relieved, she bowed her head. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

He felt almost insulted by the polite attitude she had suddenly adopted.

She started walking ahead. Before getting back on her bicycle, she glanced back at him. Despite the kindness he had shown her, she still felt suspicious. She tilted her head a bit, narrowed her eyes, tilted her head some more, then finally climbed onto her bicycle and rode off.

*Maybe I should've just made her cry,* he thought, feeling some slight regret. Soon, with a relatively content expression on his face, he started walking.

Just then, he noticed a shiny pen on the road. In a graceful motion, he stooped over and picked up the pen that she had dropped as she fell. She was still close enough to hear him if he had chosen to call out to her, but he didn't feel like doing that.

Twirling the pen between his long fingers, he sauntered down the road. Swiftly pedaling, she soon passed through Arvis's gates and out of his sight.

* * *

“The bird's here again,” Mark Evers said, smiling. Matthias didn't have to turn to look through the window to know which bird he was talking about—Phoebe. It was the usual visiting time of that bird that was so much smarter and more obedient than its owner.

Sitting on a chair by the fireplace, Matthias signed the last document, bringing the day's work to a close. His assistant took the documents and left, leaving him alone in the drawing room.

He placed the cap back on the fountain pen and looked out the window. As usual, Phoebe was perched on the railing, busily pecking at her feed.

Matthias shifted his gaze from the bird to the slender pen in his hand. The name of the pen's owner was inscribed on the cap in gold lettering: *Layla Llewellyn*.

It looked new, and it didn't seem like something she would have bought herself. Perhaps it was a gift from the gardener. He hoped it was. If it was a gift from Bill Remmer, she would do anything she could to get it back.

She was probably realizing it was gone right about now.

Gazing contemplatively at the pen, he removed its cap again. Perhaps it would be nice to do a gentlemanly act for the woman who had praised him as Karlsbar's greatest gentleman. Besides, the time had come for the pigeon to pay for all the food it had eaten.

He wrote a short message on a small strip of paper. Folding the paper, he walked out onto the balcony. The pigeon remained still as he tied the note to its leg. Matthias chuckled as he thought of the contrast between this calm bird and the frantic way its owner had ridden away on her bicycle.

Once the note was securely tied, he tossed the bird up in the air, and it immediately started flying straight towards the cottage.

* * *

Phoebe arrived just as night was falling. Layla was sitting absentmindedly at her empty desk when she heard a pecking sound

at her window. “Phoebe!”

She quickly wrapped a shawl over her shoulders and stood up. When she opened the window, a frigid breeze blew in. “You must be hungry. I'll go get you some delicious... huh?”

Her eyes widened at the sight of the note tied to Phoebe's leg. Thinking she must be seeing things, she rubbed her eyes, but there was definitely a note. It was something that hadn't happened, that couldn't have happened, since Kyle had left.

“Kyle...?” she whispered, even though she knew it was impossible that Kyle had sent the note.

After staring blankly at Phoebe's leg for a moment, she untied the string with trembling hands and unfolded the note. As she read the single sentence, the look on her face instantly shifted from curiosity to dismay.

She gasped and took a step backward. The note slipped from her fingers, fluttering to the floor in front of the window.

Staring down at the note, she took another step back, and another, until she bumped into the dresser behind her.

“It can't be,” she muttered in a shaky voice.

She hurriedly started searching through her bag, but she couldn't find the pen. She was flustered even more when she found several pebbles and leaves that had somehow gotten in there.

No longer able to deny what had happened, she staggered back to the window. She picked up the note with a hand as pale as the moonlight. She read it once more.

*Where's your pen, Layla?*

She moaned and clutched her hair. “It can't be. It can't be,” she muttered, but she knew it was no use denying it.

Meanwhile, Phoebe, well-fattened by the duke, cooed calmly in the pale autumn moonlight.

# Chapter 50:
## For My Precious Cousin

Arvis was astir with preparations for the banquet that was going to be held for relatives of the Herhardt family.

Returning from work, Layla walked her bicycle along the edge of the mansion's driveway, which was teeming with carriages and automobiles. For days, Bill had been extremely busy preparing the flowers that would decorate the mansion. Since it was past the blooming season for flowers in the garden, he was mainly using flowers from the greenhouse and going to florists in the city for varieties of flowers that weren't being grown in the greenhouse.

Layla had helped him with these tasks. She felt lucky to be able to spend several days busily occupied like this. It enabled her to forget about the pen she had lost and the note from the duke that she hadn't responded to. But now the work was done, and she had to return to Arvis. She slowed her pace as she approached the mansion's gate.

Fortunately, the duke had made no more mention of the matter. Perhaps he hadn't yet had the opportunity to. He had also been busy for days, and Phoebe, with whom he had been secretly communicating, had been locked in a cage in the cottage's backyard.

“It can't be,” Layla muttered, just as she had hundreds of times since the night when Phoebe delivered the duke's note.

How had he come up with the idea to train Phoebe to act as his own messenger pigeon?

Layla hadn't yet lived a long life, nor had she met many people, but in all her years, she had never met someone as strange and inscrutable as Matthias von Herhardt.

And why was he always taking others' possessions? “Is he a kleptomaniac?” Layla grumbled as she kicked a pebble from the road, frowning.

As great as her desire to get her pen back was, her desire to avoid any encounter with the duke was at least as great. He was no longer acting mean to her, and yet her desire to avoid him felt even stronger than before. She didn't know why she felt this way, but she did.

She let out a deep sigh and was about to enter the estate through a side gate when she was startled by the loud sound of a car horn. She turned around and saw the Brandt family's car facing her.

She approached the car with stiff steps, and the back-seat window rolled down to reveal a familiar face.

“It's been a while, Layla,” Claudine said, smiling. “I hope you've been well.” After she quickly looked Layla up and down, her smile grew brighter.

Layla unwittingly held her breath. She was gripped by a familiar sense of guilt, like that of a child who had done something very naughty. It was the same feeling she had felt at the end of the summer the previous year when facing Claudine on the day of her and Duke Herhardt's engagement ceremony. The thought that her first kiss had been stolen by Claudine's fiancé made Layla feel utterly small and pathetic.

Looking into Claudine's eyes reminded her of the duke's soft voice and laughter and the feeling of his large, hot hands, which brought that moment back to her mind.

Clasping her cold, stiff hands together, she curtsied politely to Claudine as always. “Hello, Miss Claudine.”

* * *

It came as no surprise to anyone that the Herhardt family's banquet was perfect. The duke's mother and grandmother played their joint hostess roles perfectly as well. In the Berg Empire, the name Herhardt was synonymous with perfection. If something were ever to go wrong at a Herhardt banquet, it would only increase everyone's fervent enjoyment.

“Is it all right if we go for a stroll in the greenhouse?” Claudine

asked just as it was becoming time to move to the drawing room for conversation. Her fiancé stood on one side of her and her cousin on the other.

“Of course, go ahead,” Elise von Herhardt replied. “You young people need some time to yourselves too.”

The noblewomen around her laughed in response to her subtle tone.

As the older ladies began to gossip about young people's love lives, Claudine, Matthias, and Riette left the drawing room.

“Oh, Duke Herhardt, Dowager Herhardt told me today that I'm free to expand the greenhouse once I become duchess,” Claudine said. The bright sound of her voice permeated the dim, quiet greenhouse.

“I see,” Matthias replied, a slight smile forming on his lips.

“How do you feel about that?” she asked.

“I think you should do whatever you like.”

It was exactly the response she had expected, but she still nodded cheerfully. “You should look forward to it, then. I'm going to put my heart and soul into the project, as is only fitting for Arvis's heaven.”

She strolled down the greenhouse's walking path with light steps. Her fiancé Matthias was escorting her, but she mostly conversed with the more talkative Riette, as always.

Just as she was starting to talk about the tropical flowers she was going to cultivate in the expanded greenhouse, a servant appeared, looking for Matthias. It seemed that someone needed to have a business discussion with the duke.

“Hurry back,” Claudine said as she let go of her fiancé's arm. “Riette and I will continue our walk.”

“I always end up acting as Duke Herhardt's pinch hitter with you, Lady Claudine,” Riette playfully grumbled as he offered his arm to Claudine.

Matthias and the servant left, leaving Claudine and Riette alone amid the babbling sound of the greenhouse's fountain.

They resumed their conversation as they slowly walked. Her plans for the expansion of the greenhouse were quite detailed. She already knew exactly which flowers she was going to import and where she was going to put them.

“It seems like you're already Duchess Herhardt at heart. And it seems like your love for your fiancé is exceeded by your love for Arvis,” Riette remarked with a smile.

Claudine nodded without a hint of shame. “One way or the other, it's all love for the Herhardt family, isn't it?” she replied.

“The two of you are quite impressive,” he said in a defeated tone, chuckling. “Are you really all right with the way Matthias is? He's always been like that.”

“I don't know what you're talking about, Riette.”

“He doesn't love you at all. He never has, and he never will.”

“Are there any prestigious nobles who marry for love?”

“It happens. It would happen if you were to marry me and become Marchioness Lindman.” His face and voice remained casual as always.

She smiled in response to his comment, then said, “Riette, I've been coming here to Arvis with my mother for the past ten years.” She turned to face him. “You know what that means, don't you?”

“Yes, it means that for the past ten years, the nobles of this empire have already thought of you as Duchess Herhardt.”

“That's right. That's what I like about you—you always get it.” Giggling quietly, she linked arms with him again.

He casually started leading her forward again. The subtle tension between them soon disappeared amidst their laughter.

“Also, when I expand the greenhouse, I want to raise a peacock,” she said as they passed in front of the greenhouse's colorful birds.

“Be careful. The duke has a thing for birds—if you get such a beautiful bird, he might fall in love,” Riette replied in an uncharacteristically sarcastic tone.

“Riette!”

“By the way, I noticed that he still has that bird. The pretty little

one in his bedroom."

"I don't mind. Even he needs his small pleasures."

"I pray that it won't progress beyond the level of a small pleasure."

"Save your prayers, Riette. A bird can't become a duchess, no matter how pretty."

"Well, sure," he replied, unable to refute her point this time. No matter how fond Matthias was of the canary, it was just a bird. "But how long do canaries live? A long time?"

She cocked her head as they walked around a curve in the path. "I certainly hope that noisy bird doesn't live too long."

"I thought you respected the duke's need for small pleasures."

"I do, but once that bird is gone, another bird can become his new pleasure."

"I must say, Claudine, it's times like these that I want to give you and Matthias my sincere blessings." Gazing at her face, he gave a hollow smile. "You're such a perfect couple."

He suddenly felt vaguely sorry for the duke's little bird. Thinking of how it was doomed to flutter around that perfect couple, he felt a sense of kinship with it.

Claudine flashed a natural smile. Gazing at her cruel yet beautiful face, Riette blurted, "Shall I try to get to know that bird, for my precious cousin?"

"I didn't know you were interested in birds, Riette."

"They're not normally my thing, but that one is just so pretty, you know?"

"It won't be easy," she replied, laughing with genuine interest now. "That bird is pretty, but she has the temperament of a princess."

"You underestimate me, Lady Claudine."

"I certainly do not. I was just letting you know what you're up against. I wonder, will you be able to become close with that arrogant bird?" No longer smiling, the expression on her face now looked as cold as the greenhouse walls through which the

moonlight was shining. “If you succeed, I’ll be sure to send you a congratulatory gift.”

“What sort of gift?”

“Would my thanks and love be sufficient?” she replied, lightly squeezing his arm.

After the affected smiles left their faces, they gazed at each other more solemnly.

“Sure, that'll do,” he quietly replied.

Just then, the greenhouse's door opened again.

They started slowly walking toward Duke Herhardt.

* * *

A week had passed since he had sent the note, but neither the messenger pigeon nor Layla had returned.

Staring up at the stretch of the sky into which the white pigeon had flown away, Matthias chuckled. His laughter contained no warmth. Instead, it was almost an angry laugh.

“You can go now,” he told the servants waiting in front of the balcony door.

“There will be a car waiting in front of the cabin when it's time for departure,” Mark Evers said before leaving with the rest of the servants.

Left alone on the balcony, Matthias stared into the dark water of the river for a long time. For a while, he had been able to explain it away as a result of her being flustered or being too busy helping the gardener with banquet preparations. But not anymore.

He lifted his cuff to check his watch, then walked across the balcony. There was still some time left before his afternoon meeting, and it was the weekend, so Layla was probably at the cottage.

He decided to assume that she was. Without hesitation, he departed. He walked along the riverside. Once he reached the leaf-covered forest path, he started walking with even longer strides.

Just as his regret over not having made Layla cry was growing

deeper than the color of the autumn leaves, he found her. She was off to one side of the cottage's front yard, hanging laundry. She looked so peaceful and relaxed, he felt silly for having waited so restlessly for the past week.

He stopped in his tracks and gazed at her. She was fully engrossed in the task of unfolding and hanging sheets. With each sheet, she wringed it out in several spots, groaning as she struggled to get all the water out that she could, then spread it out and placed it on the clothesline.

He felt even more frustrated as he saw the look of satisfaction on her face. *Look at that,* he thought, as he had been thinking a lot lately. He found her sly toughness irritating but also quite entertaining. In the end, it was just annoying, though.

He took a step forward, and she turned her head. When she saw him, her body went as stiff as the clothesline pole next to her. Up to that point, he had found her cute, but now he had revised his opinion.

She turned around and started running. It took him until she had made it all the way to the far end of the yard and disappeared before he realized that she was fleeing him.

He laughed. The way she was running away as if she had seen a ghost was ridiculous, as was her foolish presumption that it was all right for her to run away from him.

He deferred his judgment for the time being, however, and began to chase after her. She was running in the opposite direction from the Schulter River, towards the harvested crop field and the stream.

The gap between them quickly narrowed. He gradually increased his speed, while she kept stumbling as she fearfully looked over her shoulder.

He finally caught her under a willow tree by the stream. He had grabbed her by the shoulders, and firmly trapped her small, struggling body between himself and the tree's trunk. His hot hands clutched at her disheveled hair.

Looking down at her tear-filled eyes, he smiled. “Where do you

think you're going, Layla?”

# Chapter 51:
## Are You a Raven?

*He's crazy,* Layla realized. It was something she had somehow forgotten. *Yes, Duke Herhardt is out of his mind.*

“Aren't you going to answer?” he asked, smiling.

He was clutching her hair with a relatively gentle grip, compared to the ferocity with which he had just chased her to the willow tree. She was too frightened and humiliated to notice this, however.

“Layla,” he said in an even quieter voice.

She tried to back away from him, but the tree trunk behind her blocked her way. Despite the speed with which he had just been running, he had already caught his breath. She, on the other hand, was still panting. Each time her chest rose and fell, she could feel the proximity of his large, strong body more vividly, which only added to her embarrassment.

“Why are you...” she said in a trembling voice as she used all her might to try to push his shoulders away. “Why are you doing this to me?” Realizing that her strength wasn't enough to push him away, she tried to twist out of his grip.

Amused by her futile attempts, Matthias pressed his body firmly against hers. He smiled even more contently as he felt her body freeze with fear.

“I want you to answer me, not ask another question.” He looked straight into her scowling eyes. “Answer me, Layla.”

He slowly caressed her hair. Its soft, smooth texture seemed to soothe the displeasure he had been feeling all week long. It even made her lack of response feel tolerable.

“Do you think it's ladylike of you to neither write me back nor answer my question?”

“…”

“Layla?”

“…”

“Layla Llewellyn.” His grip on her hair gradually tightened.

Overcome by an ominous feeling, she finally replied in anger, “I don't know what you're talking about!”

“Didn't you get my note?”

“I don't know.”

“Layla, you'd better think carefully before speaking.” His smile intensified as he noted the uneasiness in her eyes. “If that worthless messenger pigeon couldn't deliver a single message, what do you think I'll do with it?”

“Y-you promised!” she shouted. “You promised not to shoot Phoebe!”

“Did I?”

“Your Grace!”

“Now I'm the one who doesn't know what you're talking about,” he said with a mischievous grin. If she was going to blatantly lie, he saw no reason why he shouldn't lie back to her.

She briefly glared at him before lowering her quivering eyelids. “I'm sorry...”

“For what?”

“You already know.”

“For ignoring my note, for running away, or for lying?”

She flinched as he pointed out each of her misdeeds. He liked that she was becoming more docile, but he didn't like that he couldn't see her eyes.

“That's enough with the apologies,” he said, raising her chin with his index finger.

He was handling her face like it was a delicate, fragile object. This made her quiver with fear. He didn't mind this reaction. The satisfaction he felt from their restored eye contact made up for the slight bitterness he was feeling.

“I guess that pen meant nothing to you, since you don't seem to care that you lost it.”

“No, it means a lot to me! But...”

She trailed off and tried to turn her head away from him, but he

gripped her chin to keep her facing him.

“But?” he replied. He didn't want their conversation to end any more than he wanted her to avoid his gaze.

With her hair and chin firmly in his grasp, she let out a resigned sigh and said, “I really don't understand you.”

Her calm, emerald-colored eyes reflected his image. They were beautiful eyes. They made him think of an eternal summer.

“Why do you keep stealing my things?” she asked.

He raised his eyebrows in reaction to her accusatory question. He knew that she was the only person in Karlsbar, if not in the entire empire, who would dare to talk to him like he was a petty thief. He was so flabbergasted he couldn't help but chuckle.

“Are you... a raven?” she asked, scowling at his jet-black hair and his blue eyes.

“A raven?” he asked with a puzzled expression on his face.

She kept speaking her mind. “You're always stealing my... that is, you're the one who's in the wrong, so I don't understand why I should be the one to go to you and beg you to give me my things back every time. It's not fair.”

Her voice was steadily rising as she grew angrier. He was happy to hear it.

“Is that why you didn't reply to my note?” he asked, smirking.

Suddenly she felt foolish, and was at a loss for words. She had gathered all her courage to rebut him, but he had dismissed her with a single derisive question.

Just when she was about to speak again, he cut her off.

“Layla.”

Her combativeness had disappeared and been replaced by a strange, hard-to-describe feeling. She quickly lowered her eyes as she struggled to think of what to say.

“Layla,” he said a little more slowly, as if he were humming a tune.

She turned her head to the side and her ear touched against his chest. She heard the faint sound of his heart beating. She worried

that he might be able to hear her heart beating as well.

She pressed her pale hands against his shoulders again. She knew it was no use, but she felt she had to try something.

When he finally took a step back to humor her, she let out the breath she had been holding. She was timid but daring, docile but nasty. These contradictions only made her more fascinating to him, and more enticing.

“Please give me back my pen,” she said.

He laughed. *She never disappoints.* “I don't have it,” he calmly replied. “I threw it away.”

“You WHAT?”

“I figured you didn't need it, since you didn't come looking for it.”

“Then why did you come to the cottage...?”

“I felt I needed to tell you, Layla,” he said, shrugging. “I'm a gentleman, after all.” Still clutching her hair, he started to caress it again. “I'm the greatest gentleman in Karlsbar, as even you have acknowledged, Miss Llewellyn.”

He loosened his grip and her hair spilled down onto her shoulders. She took a step back, glaring at him. Before she could take another step, however, she let out a pained yelp.

He had suddenly grabbed the last lock of her hair before it could slip through his fingers.

“Am I not?” he asked, looking with delight at her eyes filling up with tears from the pain.

*He's crazy,* she thought again as she struggled to get her hair out of his grip.

Grinning, he started playing with the end of the hair he was holding.

*I can't believe this guy is the head of the House of Herhardt!* As she started to worry about Arvis's future, she stumbled backward. He had suddenly let go of her hair. She heard the sound of his laughter as she fell to the ground, and then everything went black.

When she regained consciousness, his face was right in front of

her again. Only when she felt his arm wrapped around her waist did she realize that he was holding her in his embrace.

*Should I bite him?* she thought, feeling like a cornered mouse, when suddenly he let her go.

The slyly indifferent look on his face made her shudder.

She quickly ran to the edge of the stream. He remained where he stood, calmly checking his wristwatch.

"I take back what I said," she shouted. "You're not a gentleman. Not at all!"

"Suddenly you've become a harsh critic," he said, chuckling.

Her cheeks flushed red. "It's true."

"Ah, is it?"

"Yes! If you're a gentleman, I'm a queen!" She hated herself for giving him such servile praise before.

He raised his eyebrows and smirked as he fixed his coat's lapel. Then he bowed deeply to her, as if he were a servant bowing to a queen, before turning and starting to walk away. The exquisite elegance of the gesture filled her with embarrassment.

She stared blankly at his back as he receded into the distance. He had chased her down like a wild beast, tormented her, and then humiliated her all the more by bidding her this graceful farewell.

* * *

The car was waiting for him when Matthias arrived at the cabin. He got straight in. The irritation and displeasure he had been feeling when he had left the cabin were completely gone now.

The car gathered speed as it drove down the road next to the river. He gazed out the window at the Schulter River for a moment. The slight smile lingering on his face disappeared when turned to look at the documents and letters his assistant had brought for him.

To cheer himself up again, he reached into his coat pocket and retrieved the pen.

*Layla Llewellyn*—the gold lettering glittered in the afternoon sun.

He slowly ran his fingers over the pen's glossy surface. He

removed the cap, smiling. The sound of the pen scratching against paper filled the sunny interior of the car.

* * *

After delivering the rest of the mail to the school, the mailman held out a small package towards Layla. “This is for you, Miss Llewellyn.”

“For me?” she asked, taking the package. It was strange to be receiving a package at school, rather than at home, and she didn't recognize the sender's name or address. “Are you sure it's not a mistake?”

“Pardon?” He looked closely at the address label. “Hmm... No, it's definitely right.”

She smiled and shook her head. Despite the unfamiliar sender and address, her name was clearly written on the package.

“Thank you,” she said before hurrying into the school.

It was the newest teacher's duty to receive and distribute the mail each day. She always started at the principal's office and went from there to each classroom. By the time she was done distributing all the mail, her break was almost over.

She returned to her classroom, sat at her desk, and unwrapped the package she had received. There was a long, narrow box inside, without a note or any other marking.

She checked the sender's name and address again. It was an unfamiliar name, and an unfamiliar city.

She cocked her head and opened the box, then looked with wonder at the object inside. It was a black pen with gold trim.

The moment she saw it, everything made sense. She knew who had sent it, and for what reason. Her unpleasant memories from the previous weekend came flooding back, and she sighed. The pen looked far more expensive than her original one.

She carefully lifted it out of the box. Her named was engraved on the cap, just like it had been on the pen the duke had thrown away.

The bell indicating the start of classes rang, and the children

swarmed into the classroom.

She put the pen back in its box and placed it deep in a drawer of her desk. She hoped that her memories from the weekend would stay there with it, although she knew it was a vain hope.

She stepped in front of her podium and smiled brightly. “Hello, children. Let's get started!”

# Chapter 52:
## Over and Done With

It was late afternoon when Marquess Riette von Lindman arrived at the Herhardt mansion. His carriage was followed by another carriage packed with luggage for his stay at Arvis.

"Welcome, Riette," Elise von Herhardt said, smiling brightly. "I wish my sister could have come along with you."

"Ah, yes," he replied. "Mother is about to leave for a trip."

"Is she going south for the winter again?"

"Yes, she can't stand the cold," he replied in a gentle tone. "Where is Dowager Herhardt?"

"You can greet her later. She's taking a nap right now."

Elise led Riette to the drawing room. As Matthias's cousin and friend, Riette had visited Arvis countless times over the years.

The Herhardts had always treated him like part of the family.

After having tea with his aunt, he went out for a leisurely stroll in the forest. Matthias wasn't going to be home until night, and it was going to be a while until the servants had finished unloading his luggage and preparing his room. More than anything, he was curious about the girl who lived by the forest, the girl who was jeopardizing Matthias and Claudine's perfect life—Layla.

Of course, Riette had long been aware of Layla, but had never paid her much mind. He had just lumped her in with the rest of Arvis's staff. He had pitied her for her disadvantaged background, and he had known that she was quite pretty. That was all. He was thus quite surprised when he found out that she was the woman that Matthias had taken an interest in.

Scandals involving affairs between aristocrats and their maids were common and usually attracted little attention. It would be a different story, however, if the aristocrat in question was Duke Herhardt, even if it proved to be nothing more than a passing fancy.

*"Duke Herhardt lied."*

As the gardener's cottage appeared in the distance, something popped into Riette's mind that Claudine had told him one evening late the previous summer.

*“He lied in order to separate Layla and the doctor's son.”*

After saying this, Claudine had slowly turned towards Riette and smiled. Or rather, her lips had smiled; her eyes had remained cold and emotionless.

*“Matthias von Herhardt lied and schemed so that he could have that lowly orphan for himself. Can you believe it, Riette?”* she had asked, giggling.

Riette had asked her what sort of lies Matthias had told, but she hadn’t elaborated.

*“I hope he gets her as soon as possible,”* she had said, calmly gazing out the window at the sun sinking below the horizon after a long summer day at the Brandt estate. *“The sooner he has her, the sooner he'll be done with her,”* she had quietly added, her face resembling that of a bored spectator at a third-rate stage performance.

She had never shown the slightest hint of jealousy towards Layla. She had displayed a slightly derisive attitude towards her noble fiancé's taste, as if she were disappointed he hadn't set his sights a bit higher, but that was it. And Riette knew that this was how she really felt.

If Claudine had instead seemed jealous or unhappy about the situation, Riette might have had the courage to tell her not to get stuck in a marriage that was going to make her unhappy when she could marry someone else who would make her happy—Riette himself. But she had continued to see Matthias as the key to her future happiness. And Riette was well aware of this as well.

That day, the two of them had enjoyed light conversation over tea. Dinner had been similarly pleasant and carefree. The next morning, Riette had left the Brandt estate. Claudine had remained standing in the doorway until his car had drifted out of sight.

As he reflected on this memory, Riette wondered why it had suddenly arisen in his mind. He let out a hollow laugh.

Just then, he arrived at the cottage. He noticed that the cottage was linked to the unfenced hunting ground by the forest path.

The sun had already begun to set, but the inside of the cottage was dark. Reluctant to turn back around right away after walking all that way for nothing, he decided to wait for a bit. He leaned on the porch's railing and looked up at the trees, which had dropped about half their leaves.

Riette loved a woman who was never going to let love make her unhappy. Perhaps this was the reason for his own unhappiness.

He accepted this fate. He loved his simple, carefree life, and he wasn't above carrying out an even more simple, carefree bit of mischief, especially if it would bring him entertainment and bring Claudine happiness.

Time drew on. Just as he was lighting a cigarette, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching on the forest path. Soon he could also hear the sound of two people talking.

Gazing in the direction of the sounds, he took a long drag of his cigarette and slowly exhaled the smoke. Before long, he saw a man as big as a bear emerge from the forest next to a woman scarcely half his size. They stopped at the edge of the cottage's front yard when they saw him.

He smiled and started walking towards them. The gardener gave him a terse greeting once he recognized him, and the woman bowed her head.

“Hello, you must be the bird girl who lives by the forest,” Riette said with the same calm attitude he had shown when he had encountered her crying in the forest on her way to bury the birds Matthias had killed. “Ah, I suppose you're not a bird girl anymore. Now you're a bird lady. Or would you prefer I call you a bird teacher?”

There was a doubtful look in her bespectacled eyes. She frowned as she listened to him prattle on.

His impression of her remained unchanged. She was pretty, but she wasn't a stunning beauty capable of capturing every man's

heart. Nonetheless, he could vaguely sense that there was something special about her, something that had bewitched both his cousin and the doctor's son.

“Well anyway, nice to meet you, Layla.”

* * *

“Be careful of Marquess Lindman,” Bill said in a serious tone as he sat at the dinner table.

Layla chuckled as she set a pot of freshly cooked stew down in the middle of the table.

“Come now, this isn't a laughing matter,” he said.

“Uncle Bill...”

“Do you think that idler really came all the way over here on a leisurely stroll? No way. He was definitely up to something.” He tore his slice of bread in half roughly. “He went right up to you and started blathering on about this and that. I'm just saying, it was suspicious. Be careful.”

“Yes, Uncle Bill,” she replied, knowing that agreeing was the only way to get him to stop harping on this issue.

He frowned, sensing that she was just humoring him. “You should take my words to heart, Layla. Not all aristocrats are as decent and respectable as Duke Herhardt.”

“Yes, I kn... huh?” She furrowed her brow. She wanted to dispute his characterization of the duke, but she couldn't. He had described Duke Herhardt the way everyone knew him, besides her.

She nodded reluctantly, keeping her feelings to herself, and took a quick bite of her bread. As she chewed, her memories of that indecent, unrespectable man only intensified. As she thought of the mocking way he had bowed to her, and the excessively beautiful pen he had sent to the school, the bread went down the wrong pipe and she started coughing violently.

“What's the matter?”

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “I was just so hungry I ate too fast.” She took off her glasses and wiped away the tears that the

coughing had caused.

Bill stared at her for a moment, then burst into laughter. “At times like these, you still seem like a child,” he gently chided. “Eat a lot, but take your time.” He took a sizable hunk of meat from the pot and placed it in her bowl. Then another. Soon there was a pile of meat rising from her bowl.

“That's too much!” she shouted.

He was stubborn as always. “Come now, Layla, I like kids who can eat like a cow.”

“I'm not a kid anymore,” she protested.

In response, he placed one last piece of meat on top of the pile.

* * *

They spent the rest of their dinner laughing and chatting. Layla wasn't able to eat as much as a cow, but she managed to eat enough to make Bill happy.

After the meal, he fixed her creaky desk chair while she cleaned up the kitchen. Then she poured two large mugs of coffee and they sat on the porch, gazing at the leaves falling in the forest. The weather had already started to get cold, but they still finished each day chatting on the porch, as they did every year until winter rolled around.

After that, they got ready for bed. Pausing before he went into his room, he said, “Sleep well, Layla.”

“You too, Uncle Bill,” she replied. A sliver of light from outside shone through a gap in the curtain, illuminating the gentle smile on her face. “Good night.”

She went to her room, sat in the chair he had just fixed for her, and graded her students' quizzes. She then read a few chapters of a mystery novel she had borrowed from the library and wrote replies to letters from some fellow teachers she had made friends with.

As she finished the last reply and capped the old, worn-out pen she was using, she was reminded of the new pen the duke had sent her.

She stared into space for a moment, then resolutely opened the desk's drawer. She had reluctantly brought the pen home. There it was, still in its box.

She thought of the dismissive things people had always used to say about her when she had made small mistakes as a child.

*"I knew it."*

*"What can you expect from a child raised without parents?"*

These comments had always been said with a mixture of pity and contempt.

At first, she had been perplexed by the fact that she was reprimanded more than her peers for making the same mistakes as they did, or even when she was much more well-behaved than they were. But as she grew up, she came to understand that life wasn't fair. There were double standards wherever one looked.

This made her want to be even better. Even if she could never be perfect, she wanted at least to live a life that others didn't pity her for. Her resolve was strengthened each time she faced another cruel double standard. She felt she owed this to Uncle Bill, who had so lovingly raised her.

With these thoughts in mind, she took the box with the pen in it out of the drawer and grabbed a piece of brown paper.

After meticulously wrapping the box in the paper, she carefully wrote an address on it, using the same old, worn-out pen she had written the letters with. The recipient was the lord of Arvis, Duke Matthias von Herhardt. For the return address, she wrote down the same unfamiliar name and address that had been on the original package she had received at the school.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, she put the box in her bag and set off for work. She had to leave earlier than usual so that she could stop by the neighboring village's post office on her way.

After returning the gift, she felt like a weight had been lifted off her chest. She believed that it was all over and done with now. She was sure of it.

# Chapter 53:
## That Bird's Owner

"This pains my heart every time I see it, Matthias," Riette said, clicking his tongue as he opened Matthias's liquor cabinet.

Matthias wasn't much of a drinker, but the liquor cabinet in his room was always fully stocked with the finest spirits.

"It's not right that you should neglect these precious bottles," Riette said with a bold grin as he took a bottle to the table.

As always, Matthias seemed not to care what his cousin was doing.

The music coming from the phonograph blended pleasingly with the crackling of the logs in the fireplace. Riette filled a liquor glass that a servant had brought and held it out to Matthias. The graceful motion with which Matthias accepted the glass resembled the piano melody flowing through the room.

Riette leaned so far back into the sofa that he was practically lying down and looked closely at Matthias as if he were observing a stranger. Matthias was lost in thought, staring at the rim of his glass. The little canary, which now felt like it had become part of the room, was cheerfully hopping about next to him.

As Riette continued to look at Matthias, he recalled something someone had said about him at a social club: *"Your cousin is a gentlemanly demon."*

Matthias had never spoken to him about his time serving as a captain on the overseas war front. Rather than being from humbleness, this seemed to be more because he attached no significance to his service. It was instead from the mouths of other aristocratic officers that had served alongside him that word of his heroic exploits had spread.

Riette hadn't served in that war, but from their descriptions, he felt like he had seen Matthias on the battlefield with his own eyes. He had a peculiar attitude—unlike other young soldiers, he was

neither a passionate fighter intoxicated by the thrill of battle nor was he utterly bored by the tedium of military duties. He systematically carried out the tasks assigned to him, and though he didn't deny the satisfaction of accomplishment, he didn't seem to think any of it meant much, either. Anyone talking about Captain Herhardt inevitably concluded their account by saying, *“So... I really don't understand him.”*

Riette knew better than anyone that this dispirited comment summed up Matthias von Herhardt better than any other description.

*“I don't understand him,”* always uttered with a sigh.

Riette sighed as he thought about it now. *I don't understand him.*

A lifetime of observing Matthias had brought him to that same conclusion. Just as combining all the beautiful colors of the rainbow produced pure white light, so all of Matthias's various qualities combined to produce an inscrutable whole.

He was a noble aristocrat, a worthy successor, a good cousin, and an honorable soldier. Each of these qualities was clear and distinct in itself, yet the man to which they added up was impossible to parse.

Some praised Duke Herhardt for the way he suppressed his personal desires so that he could fulfill his duties, but Riette was skeptical of this. The Matthias he knew had no desires to suppress. And this made his attitude towards this Layla Llewellyn girl all the more perplexing.

Riette smiled, his lips wet with the drink. Matthias looked at him. The canary was now sitting on his shoulder. One might have thought this would bother Matthias, but he didn't seem to mind it at all.

“How long do you think you'll continue to act as that bird's owner?” Riette asked.

“As long as I want to,” Matthias replied without hesitation. He then finally took a sip of the liquor glass he had been holding. The bird flew up into the air briefly before landing back on his shoulder

and rubbing its beak on the strap of his suspenders.

"How long do you think that will be?" Riette asked.

"Who knows." Matthias set down his glass and leaned against the armrest of his seat. His onyx cufflinks reflected the light from the fireplace.

"Aren't you curious about anything?" Riette asked. "Why I'm here at Arvis, what I'm planning to do here, anything like that?"

"Nope," Matthias indifferently replied. Riette had appeared at Arvis out of the blue and stayed for weeks before. It was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Fine, be that way," Riette replied, laughing loudly before he drained his glass. He looked closely at Matthias and thought, *Is it lust?* That seemed like the most likely explanation. *It's just a man's lust for a pretty woman. It's nature. Even someone without any emotions would still have natural instincts. But why that orphan, of all people? He's always been immune to the charms of women much more beautiful and elegant than her.* Soon he felt like his thoughts were going in circles, so he decided to stop pondering the matter.

The bird was hopping about on the table now. Matthias gave a short whistle and it flew right back to him.

After witnessing this, Riette tried calling the bird himself, whistling an elaborate melody. Perched on the back of Matthias's hand, the bird cocked its head but showed no inclination to fly towards Riette.

"What the heck," Riette said, chuckling incredulously. "Can a bird recognize its owner?"

Suddenly Riette recalled the wary look Layla had given him. He didn't expect her unfriendly facade to last. If she had opened up to the doctor's son and the duke, why wouldn't she open up to him as well? He was also sure that Matthias would eventually abandon Layla for the sake of Claudine. This was Claudine's desired outcome.

"Want to go hunting this weekend?" Riette asked as he poured himself another glass.

Matthias thought for a moment then gave an unexpected

response. “You go alone. I'll make sure everything is ready for you.”

Riette was taken aback. “What?” As far back as he could remember, Matthias had never once turned down a chance to go hunting. “Are you serious?”

Before Matthias could answer, there was a knock at the door. It was Hessen, the butler. “The mail has arrived, Your Grace,” he said, walking towards Matthias with a tray with several envelopes and a package on it.

Riette stared aloofly at the butler. *Why does he have to come in here right now for something as trivial as that?* After a moment, he realized that the butler was giving him a look that seemed to suggest he needed to leave Matthias's bedroom. “I'll see you tomorrow, then, Duke Herhardt,” he said, waving. He then took his glass and left the room.

Hessen waited until Riette's footsteps were no longer audible, then said, “There's a package, Your Grace.”

“A package?” Matthias replied, accepting the small box Hessen was stiffly holding out to him. He didn't recognize the sender's name or address. “Who's this?”

“A relative of mine,” Hessen replied. “I used this name and address when I was carrying out your recent command.”

“My recent command...? Ah.” He realized after a moment that Hessen was referring to his command from the previous week to send a good pen to Layla. Once he realized this, everything suddenly made sense.

“Um, Your Grace, may I-”

“All right,” Matthias said, cutting Hessen off as he often did. “You can go.”

Hessen glanced at his master's fingers tapping against the box, then left at once.

Once the door was closed, Matthias stood up, holding the box in his hand. He tore off the wrapping paper and threw it in the fireplace.

He opened the box and found a pen and a note sitting neatly

inside. He lifted the note and carefully read it.

*After thinking about it, I realized that losing the pen was my fault. It was my fault that I fell down, that I didn't pick up everything I had dropped, and that I didn't get back my possession at the proper time. There's no need for Your Grace to take responsibility for my mistake. I am thus returning something I should never have received in the first place.*

The note was unsigned, but it was clear enough from the self-assured attitude in the message that it had come from Layla. As Matthias read it a few more times, he raised his eyebrows and started to smile, eventually letting out a dry laugh.

The rolling fire devoured the crumpled note in an instant. It then made short work of the box and the shiny new pen.

Gazing into the flames, Matthias's face showed a self-mocking sneer, then anger, then humiliation, and finally amusement. These distinct emotions melded into one, then disappeared from his face, leaving in their place a calm expression overlaid by the glowing of the fire.

* * *

Classes were ending early today, and yet Layla was more busy than usual because it was the day of the school council meeting. The school's building was quite old and rather small, so they were going to discuss the possibility of expanding it.

Layla had been assigned the task of setting up the meeting room. She arranged enough desks and chairs for all the members who would be in attendance and prepared writing implements and notepads as well.

Mrs. Graeber approached with hurried steps. “Miss Llewellyn, are you finished?”

Layla looked around the meeting room one last time, then smiled and nodded her head. “Yep, it's ready.”

“Then let's get out of here. The sponsors are arriving.”

“Already?” Layla quickly straightened her dress, then followed

Mrs. Graeber out of the room.

There was a long line of the sponsors' lavish carriages and automobiles entering through the school's front gate.

Layla felt an ominous feeling for a moment, then shook her head to rid herself of it. She had read the list of sponsors who would be at today's meeting several times, and there was no one from the Herhardt family. And yet an uneasy feeling lingered in her chest.

She figured that this was probably because of the gift she had returned. It had been several days, but the duke hadn't responded in any manner. He had neither written back to her nor had he paid her a visit and questioned her as he had in the past. She had been on edge for days out of fear that he was going to subject her to more humiliation. Perhaps she had injured the duke's pride. *Well, it had to happen eventually,* she thought.

Despite how unknowledgeable she was about romance, she was old enough to have a vague sense of the duke's lustfulness and to know that that could be a problem for her.

She hated it all—the duke, his lust, and the impact his lust could have on her. She was tired of being swept up in a world she had nothing to do with. She was tired of getting hurt. She had tried to express this in the note she included with the pen, so perhaps the duke understood now. Perhaps that aloof man's silence indicated that he was submitting to her wishes.

Gradually calming down, she took her spot at the end of the line of school employees greeting the sponsors. It was a cold, rainy autumn day. There had been concern that the weather might have lowered the attendance, but fortunately, this was not the case—everyone on the attendee list showed up.

Layla faithfully fulfilled her assigned role, politely greeting each sponsor with a cheerful smile. She would be in charge of serving tea once the meeting began. Then she would wait quietly until it was time to bid the sponsors farewell. If she could make it to that point without a hitch, her first school council meeting would be a success.

After the last noblewoman to arrive entered the school, the

principal turned around. The teachers were about to turn around as well, when another car stopped in front of the school.

The bewildered look on the principal's face quickly gave way to a beaming smile. “Goodness! Your Grace!”

Layla had been preparing herself to deliver another friendly greeting, when she realized who it was. *No way.* She shook her head in disbelief, then anxiously looked again.

Sure enough, it was none other than Duke Herhardt, standing with his distinctive upright posture under an umbrella his assistant was holding for him.

His gaze passed slowly over each of the teachers lined up to greet him before stopping on Layla's ashen face.

As soon as their eyes met, he smiled. To anyone else watching, it was an exceedingly gentle smile.

# Chapter 54:
## Taking Responsibility

Layla had no memory of what happened during the meeting. Even as she smiled and talked, she had no awareness of what she was saying or doing. Her attention was fixed only on Duke Herhardt.

*Why is he here?*

As she repeatedly glanced at him, her eyes were filled with fear and suspicion.

As if to mock her, Matthias wore an utterly calm, composed expression as he participated in the meeting. The principal, delighted by the duke's unexpected visit, was more talkative than usual, and Matthias readily supported his proposal to expand the school building. Of course, Matthias was being so agreeable because he didn't really care about the matter. All that he cared about was the nervous-looking woman standing in the corner.

“Miss Llewellyn,” a teacher said.

Matthias's smile brightened at once.

“Miss Llewellyn?” the teacher repeated, with a doubtful tone this time.

Everyone in the meeting room turned towards Layla. Matthias was last to turn his head. Layla was standing in the corner like a child being scolded, fidgeting with her hands as she stared at her feet. Matthias half-lowered his eyelids as he looked at her.

After a moment, Layla started blushing as she realized that everyone was looking at her. “Um... I'm sorry.”

Matthias didn't like the way she was keeping her head lowered with a flustered look on her face. The Layla he knew was always speaking and acting boldly. He found the meek, crestfallen attitude she was displaying now pathetic.

Frowning, the principal started to speak. “Miss Llewellyn, what are you-”

“Please continue,” Matthias calmly said, cutting him off. He made eye contact with the startled principal, then smiled warmly and said, “I'd like to hear about the expansion proposal in more detail.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” the principal replied. His delight at the duke's positive attitude towards the proposal made him forget the young teacher's awkwardness at once.

While the details of the principal's expansion plan for the school were being discussed, Layla helped Mrs. Graeber serve the tea. *Pull yourself together, Layla,* she told herself. *Stop making a fool of yourself. You've got to do a good job today.*

Unfortunately, her desperate wish came to naught as soon as she approached Duke Herhardt. The teacup clattered on the saucer as she held it with trembling hands. Matthias turned his head as he heard the clattering sound approaching him. When he made eye contact with her, she looked like she was about to cry. She looked frightened and confused. This was the reaction he had hoped for, and yet seeing it right in front of him, he didn't like it.

Changing his mind, he averted his eyes. He imagined her blushing and growing even more flustered after spilling the tea. It would be an entertaining thing to see, but not there at the school. Luckily she managed to set his tea down in front of him safely. As she set it down, he noticed that her hands were as white as wax figures.

After serving the tea, Layla returned to the corner of the room and the meeting resumed.

As the principal continued his long, rambling series of remarks and proposals, Matthias thought only of those hands. He thought about their slender fingers and their nails, which resembled glossy flower petals. He then thought of the summer afternoon when she had frantically hit him with those hands and scratched at him with those nails and yet hadn't hurt him at all. He recalled how small those hands had felt when he had grabbed them and interlocked his fingers with hers.

Just as he was recalling the feeling of pinning those hands to the

dusty ground and pressing his lips to hers, the meeting came to an end. The sponsors approved the expansion proposal, with Matthias pledging the largest sum of all. Each of the other aristocrats' friendly faces hid an urgent desire to leave and go home as soon as possible.

Matthias, however, turned to the principal, who seemed ready to grant whatever wish he had, and asked, “May I have a brief look around the classrooms before I go?”

“Of course, Your Grace. At the moment, though, I will need to bid farewell to the other sponsors...” The principal looked nervously around the room, until his gaze settled on Layla, who was practically hiding in the corner. “Would it be all right if Miss Llewellyn showed you around?”

It was just the response he was hoping for. Graciously nodding, he slowly rose from his seat. “Of course. That will be fine.”

* * *

Layla was in charge of the first-grade classroom at the end of the first-floor hall. Since the students had been dismissed early, the heater had been turned off and the classroom was cold and humid.

Layla switched on the lights and walked stiffly into the classroom. *I just have to show him around the classroom, and it'll be over,* she told herself. So far Matthias had been behaving like he really was just a sponsor who was interested in seeing the facilities, and Layla had managed to show him around without fainting or impulsively running away.

*Just a little longer,* she told herself.

“This is where the youngest students...”

Just as she was starting to describe the purpose of the classroom, the door slammed shut. Startled, she trailed off and turned around. Matthias was leaning against the closed door. “I take it this is your classroom, Miss Llewellyn?” he asked, looking at her desk, which had some of her belongings arranged on it, and her coat hanging on the back of her chair.

“Yes, it is, Your Grace,” she replied, slowly backing away towards the window, the farthest spot away from him in the room.

Her heart started to beat as violently as the raindrops pattering against the windowpane.

He started sauntering across the room, closing the gap between them. She looked uneasily around the room, standing next to her desk by the window.

“What are you so nervous about?” he asked, smiling.

His smile provided no comfort to Layla, however. He had always looked at her with a dead-eyed smile before committing his most cruel behavior.

“This is a school, Your Grace. It's not Arvis.”

“That's right, it's a school.” He continued to walk towards her. “And I am a sponsor of this school, so there's nothing wrong with me coming here, is there?”

“Well, you didn't inform the school that you would be attending the meeting today, so I'm not sure what you're-”

“Do you think I'm stupid, Layla?” He stopped two steps away from her, and calmly stood with his hands behind his back. “If I had informed the school that I planned to attend, then you wouldn't have been here today, would you have? You would've found some excuse to be absent.”

Her lips twitched for a moment, but she couldn't deny what he was saying. Eventually she said, “If you had something to say to me, I would have preferred you said it at Arvis.”

“I don't know, Layla,” he replied, smirking. “I think here is better, actually.” He walked in front of her desk.

She was desperately looking through the window that looked out into the hallway, hoping that someone might be passing by who could help. The sound of her heavy breathing blended with the sound of the pouring rain outside.

“We're having this conversation because we're here,” he murmured as he observed the objects neatly laid out on her desk—a quill and blotting paper; an ornate porcelain doll; an empty

chocolate box filled with unused pen nibs. The various dainty items all resembled their owner in one way or another.

Soon his gaze came to rest on the three ink jars at the edge of the desk—black, blue, and red. A smile formed on his lips as he glanced at each jar in turn, before deciding on the one closest to himself—the red one.

She thought about trying to stop him, then changed her mind and lowered her head. *He's just looking at my things and touching them. I don't want him to see me overreacting.* She desperately hoped that her coworkers would be done seeing off the other sponsors and would return soon.

Meanwhile, the duke had removed the ink jar's lid. She only realized this when she heard the sound of the lid dropping onto her desk.

Bemused by his odd behavior, she looked up and shouted, “Y-your Grace!”

He had walked to her chair and was pouring the red ink onto her coat, in a graceful motion, as if he were pouring wine.

Astonished, she ran towards the chair. He stepped back, still holding the half-empty ink jar. She frantically tried to wipe up the ink with her handkerchief, but it had already stained her light-gray coat. “What are you doing?!” she shouted with tears in her eyes.

“Something I'll take responsibility for,” he calmly replied.

She stared at him, mouth agape, stupefied by his impenetrable reply. He then walked towards her and casually started pouring the ink on her shoulders. The red liquid flowed down her blouse and skirt, even dripping onto her shoes.

After shaking out the last drop, he let go of the empty jar, which dropped to the floor with a loud *ping* and then rolled away. Some drops of the red ink had splattered on his own well-polished shoes, but he didn't seem the least bit concerned about that.

She tried to scream, but no sound came out. She was so startled and frightened, all she could do was pant. Covered in the blood-red ink, quivering, she looked like someone whose throat had been slit.

“What to do, Layla?” He surveyed the mess he had made, then furrowed his brow. “I guess I'll have to take responsibility.” Even as he made this cruel comment, the smile remained on his lips.

* * *

“Thank you for the understanding you've shown towards Miss Llewellyn's mistake,” the principal said, walking alongside Matthias.

After seeing off the other sponsors, the principal and teachers had rushed to find the duke. They had arrived at the classroom and found their rookie coworker covered with red ink, which they all assumed she had spilled on herself, and the duke looking at her with pity.

“It was my mistake,” Matthias replied, repeating the explanation he had given a moment earlier. “The ink jar slipped from my hand. I tried to catch it, but I ended up splashing it onto Miss Llewellyn. Thus, it is I who should be apologizing to her.”

“It's kind of you to say that Your Grace, but I'm still deeply sorry for not providing you with a better experience on your first visit to our school.”

“I had a pleasant enough time,” Matthias replied as they arrived at the building's front door. He nodded to the anxious principal and then turned to Layla, who was standing in the back of the group. “Miss Llewellyn, come with me.”

All her attempts to wipe the ink from her clothes had only spread it around more, making her now look like someone who had been in a gruesome accident.

“No, thank you. I'm fine, Your Grace,” she replied in a soft, trembling voice as she held back her anger.

Matthias was happy to see that the fear was gone from her eyes, and had been replaced by a vaguely defiant glint. He much preferred this to her earlier distressed, trembling demeanor.

“Miss Llewellyn, His Grace is trying to apologize. You should go with him,” the principal said, smiling indulgently. “It's raining and you didn't bring your bicycle. You should go with the duke.”

“I have an umbrella, so I can just walk.”

The more Layla persisted, the more ashen the principal's face became.

“That may be the case, Miss Llewellyn,” Matthias said, “but think of passersby who might see you walking in the rain when your clothes are stained red like that. They'll be shocked. Someone might call the police.”

Everyone laughed at Matthias's joke. Biting her lip, Layla looked down at her clothes. She really did look like she was covered in blood. Perhaps Matthias's joke was more than just a joke.

The principal looked to Mrs. Graeber, who then walked over to Layla. Matthias, who had already gotten into his car, calmly watched as Layla was practically dragged to the car and loaded in like a piece of luggage.

Matthias moved to the side, giving the seething Layla more room.

The car took off the moment the door was shut.

# Chapter 55:
## What Can I Destroy?

After sitting for a while in silence, with her bag and her coat on her lap, Layla finally spoke. “I don't think this is the way to Arvis.”

The car was heading not towards Arvis but towards downtown Karlsbar.

“Mr. Evers,” she said, addressing the duke's assistant in the front passenger seat, “this road is-”

“I told you, Layla,” Matthias said, cutting her off.

She turned towards Matthias and looked him straight in the eye, too angry to feel afraid.

“I told you I was going to take responsibility,” he said.

The word *responsibility* seemed to be a strange source of strength for him. Layla clutched her skirt as she looked at him.

“I ruined your clothes, so I'm going to take responsibility for my actions.”

“No, there's no need for that. I-”

“Why not? Do you feel the wrong I committed wasn't bad enough?” he asked. He wasn't hiding his devious nature, despite the chauffeur and assistant sitting in the front seats.

Layla took a deep breath, unable to respond. Her hands were stained red as well, from her futile attempts to get the ink out of her clothes. She felt embarrassed looking at them, as if they were a reflection of her emotional distress.

*I should've just thrown the pen away,* she thought. She had thought that returning the gift would bring an end to her strange relationship with the duke. Now she was angry at herself for being so naive. She bit her tongue out of self-loathing. She didn’t even know what to call the emotion he elicited in her. It was a combination of shame, discomfort, frustration, and, sometimes, heartrending sadness.

She looked at him, trying to figure out the emotion's name. He

was looking right back at her. Behind his expressionless face, the dull, gray blur of the city rushed by. As she continued to look at him, she started to detect a hint of loneliness behind his eyes.

Just then, the car came to a stop. They were on a street full of high-end stores. Without any word from their master, the chauffeur and assistant exited the car, leaving the two passengers in the back seat. The air in the car felt like it had suddenly grown heavier, making Layla feel even more dispirited. Quickly grabbing her umbrella, she said, “I'll be leaving now.”

But before her small, trembling hand could reach the car door, Matthias took hold of it. She tried to pull free of his grip, but it was useless—he was easily able to overcome her resistance, even without exerting much effort.

“Where are you going to go?” he asked.

“I don't need new clothes. I'm going to go home.”

“That's quite self-centered of you, Layla.” He chuckled quietly and slightly loosened his tight grip on her wrist. “Have you not considered how Mr. Remmer would feel about this?”

She stopped struggling. “What...?”

“Think of how much it would pain Mr. Remmer's heart to see you show up at the cottage looking like that.”

“Are you saying that you, the very person who caused me to look like this, are concerned about Uncle Bill right now?”

“Well, Mr. Remmer has been my family's gardener for decades. Longer than you've been alive.”

He tugged on her wrist, pulling her so that her face was right in front of his. Close enough that she could feel his breath.

“If Mr. Remmer asks you what happened, are you confident that you can explain it properly?”

“A-absolutely,” she replied.

She tried to pull away from him, but he used his other hand to firmly grasp her cheek.

“I certainly can,” she said.

A twisted smile appeared on his face, and he whispered, “I did

this to you, Layla, and I'm going to take responsibility for it."

The more she tried to avert her gaze, the more adamantly he forced her to keep looking at him.

"It is my responsibility today to buy you new clothes so that I can send you back to Mr. Remmer looking dignified."

"No! Let me go! I-"

"Think carefully, Layla. The sensible thing for you to do would be to accept my apology and take the new outfit as a consolation for my actions. What will people think if instead you obstinately refuse my apology? They'll find it quite odd, don't you think?"

Furrowing his brow, he looked out the car window. The chauffeur and assistant were standing with their backs to the car, but they were surely aware there was an altercation going on inside the car.

"They'll probably think you're a whiny mistress of mine or something."

Layla glared at him, furious about the off-color comment.

Chuckling to himself, he let go of her wrist, then tapped on the window. Mark Evers immediately turned around and opened the back-seat door. Layla exited the car in an instant.

Noticing that she had left her bag and coat, Matthias beckoned Mark closer to him, then whispered a short command to him. Mark nodded and shut the door again. Layla was facing away from the car with her arms wrapped around her body, shivering as she stood under the chauffer's umbrella.

Mark started to remove his own coat to give it to her. Watching this, Matthias narrowed his eyes and knocked on the window again. His assistant quickly put his coat back on and opened the door.

Matthias held out his own coat and told him to give her that instead. Mark accepted the coat without comment.

The door was closed again, and the interior of the car was filled with the sound of the rain beating down on it. Matthias gazed through the rain streaming down the window at Layla standing outside. Mark draped the duke's coat over her shivering shoulders.

She seemed too distracted by the cold even to grasp where the coat had come from.

The chauffeur got back in the car and started driving. Matthias watched as Layla grasped the coat's lapels and followed the assistant into a clothing boutique.

This image stuck in Matthias's memory for a long time.

* * *

“Wait, why are we going in here?” Layla asked, stopping in her tracks. She had just realized that they were walking into a hotel. Specifically, it was the luxurious hotel where Claudine had invited her for tea the previous year.

“It's what His Grace told me to do, Miss Llewellyn,” Mark replied, smiling. “He instructed me to take you here for a cup of tea before returning to Arvis. It's a form of apology.”

“No. These clothes are apology enough for me.”

“That's not for me to judge.”

“But...”

“I just carry out my master's orders, as I'm sure you're aware.” He looked at her with a slightly embarrassed look on his face.

Realizing that there was no use trying to be stubborn right now, she reluctantly followed him inside.

“You know, His Grace has a pet bird, just like you do, Miss Llewellyn. It's a very small, pretty bird.”

Layla squinted in disbelief. “The duke? A pet bird?”

She couldn't imagine anything more absurd than the slayer of beautiful birds keeping a bird as a pet. She thought for a moment then asked, “Is he planning to hunt it...?”

Mark was taken aback by her question. He wanted to clarify his master's relation to the canary, but they had already made it to the tearoom's entrance.

Matthias was seated by the window, which looked out onto the rainy terrace. Mark left, having fulfilled his duty by bringing Layla there.

“Sit,” Matthias said.

Sensing that people were starting to stare, Layla reluctantly sat down across from him. She removed her coat, revealing a turquoise dress made of velvet. It had a white lace collar that was so wide, it touched her shoulders.

Matthias's gaze moved slowly down from her collar to the pearl buttons adorning the dress's front, then to her legs and feet. She was wearing new stockings and shoes as well. Lifting his gaze again, he noticed that her hair seemed to have been newly styled as well. He was glad to see her looking elegant and modern. He much preferred it to her usual outfits, which generally resembled a nun's habit from the previous century.

A cup of tea was placed in front of her at once, and was soon followed by some fruit and a slice of cake so exquisite it almost looked fake.

“Eat,” he commanded.

She glared at him, not moving.

Unafraid of her scowl, he stared back at her. “Am I going to have to feed you?” he sarcastically asked. “If you want, I can take responsibility for that as well.”

As he started to lean forward, she hurriedly picked up her fork and looked aimlessly around the lavishly set table before picking at the cake slice, which was covered in pale-pink whipped cream. *She seems to have a sweet tooth,* he thought. This made him curious. After watching her chew for a moment, he quietly asked, “What sort of foods do you like?”

Fiddling with her fork, she looked him in the eye and said, “Well, I like pretty much anything, as long as I'm not being forced to eat it in front of you, Your Grace.” It was a bold thing to say, but her voice was shaking.

His laugh was audible even through the sound of the rain beating against the window. “Unless you're trying to entertain me, I'd suggest you change your tack. I find it amusing when you adopt that cheeky attitude towards me.” He leaned forward and said in a

near whisper, “And when I get amused like this, Layla, it drives me wild.”

She leaned back in her chair as far as he had leaned forward in his. She still had the whipped-cream-covered fork in her hand.

“Perhaps you should try a gentler, meeker attitude. I'd find that much less amusing.”

Seeing that she was leaning back so far that she was in danger of toppling backward, he relented and leaned back himself.

After a long pause, she set down her fork. As she wiped her mouth with her napkin, her cheeks started to turn red.

“So, what sort of foods do you like?” he asked, repeating his question.

She hesitated for a moment before replying in a gentle tone, “I'm not a picky eater.”

He was displeased to witness her suppressing her natural urge to snap back at him. “Really? You're a good girl, then.”

She once again had to stifle the rage that immediately welled up inside her. She couldn't keep her eyes from gleaming with anger, however.

*I wonder if you'll be able to keep control of your emotions like this elsewhere,* he wanted to say, but instead, he took a sip of coffee.

As much as he disliked seeing her acting meek and defeated, he didn't want others to see her true nature. As he contemplated that true nature, he realized that he might be the only person who had ever witnessed it, including Bill Remmer. This gave him a strange feeling of exaltation.

She continued to maintain a meek, gentle demeanor as if she were really trying to avoid amusing him. She answered his questions and ate her food obediently. And yet an indignant look was detectable in her eyes the whole time. Occasionally she would blush, and a few times she chewed on her lip, which had a smudge of whipped cream on it.

He let out a hollow laugh as it occurred to him that he had only managed to have this time together with her as a result of doing

wrong to her. *I have to destroy something of hers to have her—how ridiculous!*

A momentary frown on his face was soon replaced by a peaceful smile. He gazed at her with an enraptured look in his eyes. Even in this meek, gentle guise, she was driving him wild.

*So Layla, what can I destroy that will make you mine?*

Deep in thought, he cocked his head to the side. She turned her gaze from the darkened view outside back towards him. He looked into her beautiful, emerald eyes, which only he knew.

# Chapter 56:
## Phoebe

“I owe you a debt of gratitude, Dr. Ettman,” Katharina von Herhardt said, looking warmly as always at the doctor as he packed up his medical bag.

Dr. Ettman looked back at her with a gentle smile. “Don't mention it, Dowager Herhardt. I'm just glad that it was nothing serious.”

“At my age, it's only a matter of time before it *is* something serious.”

“I don't like to hear you say that, Ma'am.” He slowly rose from his seat and stood next to the bed on which the dowager was lying.

She was only suffering from a mild cold, but she was old enough that even this called for a doctor's attention.

“It's all thanks to Dr. Ettman that I've remained in good health even as I get on in years.” She smiled at her daughter-in-law, who was standing next to the doctor. “Isn't that right, Elise?”

“Absolutely,” Elise von Herhardt replied. “Thank you so much, Dr. Ettman.”

“It's my pleasure, Lady Herhardt. Well, I should be going now.”

“By the way, has Kyle been doing well?” Elise asked.

Dr. Ettman winced upon hearing this question, then quickly forced a calm-looking smile. “Yes. I'm happy to report that he's passionately immersed in his studies at the university.”

“I see. Well, he takes after his father, so I'm sure he'll become an excellent doctor.”

“I'm honored that you think so.”

“I suppose he'll be returning to Karlsbar for winter break?”

“I don't believe his plans for winter break have been decided yet.”

“Sure, since it's his first break, I guess he might want to stay in the capital to pursue the social scene there. Or perhaps he'll want to

go on a trip to gain some new experiences. Maybe somewhere warm, in the south."

"Yes. I intend to respect his wishes, no matter what he decides to do."

"Let me know when he decides. If he decides to stay in the capital, I can let him know about some of the best social clubs there. If he decides to travel, I'd be more than happy to help him with that as well."

Dr. Ettman seemed surprised and touched by the enthusiastic support she was offering.

Just as the doctor was about to leave the bedroom, Elise added, "Give Mrs. Ettman my regards as well." She said this in a surprisingly friendly tone, considering that the Herhardt family had severed all social connections with Mrs. Ettman.

Dr. Ettman smiled politely and left. The maids followed him out, leaving the duke's mother and grandmother alone in the bedroom.

"You're certainly showing a lot of interest in Kyle, Elise," the dowager said, smiling as she sat up in bed and leaned against a cushion.

"Well, I thought about what you said, and you're right—if Kyle becomes a good doctor, it will be good for Matthias as well. Even though we've cut ties with Mrs. Ettman, the Ettman family can continue to provide us with medical care."

"I'm glad you agree," Dowager Herhardt replied, nodding.

If everything went as planned, Kyle would succeed his father as the Herhardts' family doctor.

Soon their conversation naturally shifted from Kyle to Matthias, the honorable heir of the House of Herhardt.

"I heard that Matthias recently attended a school council meeting at the village school," Elise happily mentioned. "I'm so glad that he's showing such close attention to matters like that."

"He's turning into a proper head of the household much faster than we expected him to," Dowager Herhardt replied.

"Yes, he is. He's shaping up to be one of the best dukes in our

family's great history."

* * *

It was basically a coincidence. Matthias had a free day, so Riette had suggested that they go to a social club, and Matthias had agreed.

After a few hours of socializing that Matthias found somewhat enjoyable but also somewhat boring, they were on their way back when they saw Layla.

The car carrying them had just turned onto the road leading to the mansion when they saw someone whom Matthias recognized at once. It was a long way back to the mansion from where they were, but there was no question that it was Layla. Wearing the white coat Matthias had bought for her, she was riding her bicycle down Platanus Road on this late-autumn day.

As the car approached her, Riette soon recognized her as well. "Hey, isn't that Layla Llewellyn, the bird-loving lady who lives by Arvis's hunting ground?" he asked. Despite his playful tone, he had a serious look in his eyes. Instead of looking at Layla herself, he was watching his cousin watch her.

Matthias gave a quick nod while keeping his eyes fixed on Layla's back. She looked tired, perhaps because she had just finished a long day of work, but she was pedaling with great vigor.

She soon sensed the car approaching from behind and moved over to the edge of the road. Just then, the car passed by her. Seeing her up close, Matthias noticed that she was also wearing the shoes he had bought for her.

"You said she's a teacher at the village school, right?" Riette asked, still smiling at Matthias. "She must be on her way home after work."

"Could be," Matthias replied. He then shifted his gaze away from her, but a gentle smile remained on his lips.

Riette marveled at the way his cousin was smiling. Matthias looked like a boy in love for the first time, as much as that didn't

match his personality.

Sensing Riette's gaze, Matthias suddenly turned towards him and asked, “Do you have something to say to me?”

Riette covered up his embarrassment with a sly smile, then quickly thought of an excuse. “Yes, I wanted to talk about the hunt today. Would you be able to come along? I've invited some guests, so I think it would be odd if the lord of Arvis weren't there.”

After Riette had announced his weekend plans to go hunting in Arvis's forest, a flood of requests for invitations had come in. Matthias had told Riette he could invite whomever he wished.

“I can't very well act like I'm the lord of your estate, Matthias, can I?”

The car came to a stop in front of the mansion.

Matthias thought for a moment, then gladly agreed to join Riette on the hunt. After all, it would be a weekend so Layla would be around.

“There we go,” Riette said as he got out of the car, “now you're acting like the Duke Herhardt I know and love.”

Riette patted Matthias forcefully on the shoulder, and Matthias made no effort to stop him.

The cousins walked side by side into the mansion's well-lit main hall.

* * *

Phoebe was a smart pigeon. Smart enough to figure out a way to escape from the cage she in which she had been confined in the cottage's backyard.

It started with Bill.

One weekend morning, Layla was busy making breakfast, so Bill went out to feed Phoebe. After feeding her, he failed to lock the door of her cage properly. Of course, Phoebe didn't notice this at the time. She was too busy pecking away at her feed.

She finally noticed that her cage was not in its usual state when Layla and Bill were raking the leaves in the backyard.

“Don't go into the woods today, Layla. I heard that the duke will be hunting today with his friends,” Bill said.

Layla let out a deep sigh. “It's been so long since he's gone hunting, I thought maybe he'd found a new hobby. I guess not.”

“Wouldn't it be a waste if a great marksman like the duke gave up hunting?”

“You sound like you're on his side, Uncle Bill.”

“No, it's not that, it's just... Who said anything about sides, anyway?! I just think it would be a waste, that's all.”

Layla snickered. “It really seems like everyone at Arvis likes the duke.”

“What's there to dislike about him? There's not another nobleman as noble as him. That arrogant noblewoman sure is lucky to have gotten engaged to him.”

“Sure...” Layla replied, smiling brightly as she continued to rake the leaves.

Throughout this conversation, Phoebe had remained calmly perched inside her cage. Layla didn't notice anything awry about the cage from where she was standing across the yard.

It was later that morning, after Bill left for work and Layla went inside to clean the cottage, that Phoebe made her escape.

A strong wind blew, causing the cage's unlatched wooden door to creak. Phoebe approached the door with curiosity and tried pecking at it. It moved slightly. She tried pecking more forcefully, and suddenly the door swung open.

She stared through the open door for a moment, then realized that this was her chance to escape the cruel imprisonment she had been subjected to after delivering a message for the duke.

She spread her white wings and took off. After circling the yard a few times, she flew towards the woods. Shortly afterward, the duke and his companions passed by the cottage on their way to the hunt.

Layla heard the sound of the group passing by, so she stopped mopping for a moment and stuck her head out the window to take a look. The hunting dogs were in front, with the noblemen following

behind on horseback—it was a familiar sight. However, the sight of the hunting rifles glinting in the morning sunlight still made her recoil in fear.

Just then, the duke turned his head in the direction of the cottage window. They made eye contact. Layla jumped back, startled. After so many frightening experiences involving him, the mere sight of his face was causing her heart to pound uneasily.

She stood for a moment, unsure what to do, then closed the window and drew the thick curtains. Even after the sounds of the group had receded into the distance, her heart wouldn't slow to its normal pace. *It's not like it's my first time seeing him,* she thought. *How have I become even more of a coward than I was when I was younger?*

As she rubbed her cold hands together, she heard the first gunshot, soon followed by the sound of the dogs barking.

*It was probably him.*

An image flashed into her mind of the cold, bloodstained corpse of a bird that the duke had shot.

Deciding that she wanted to leave until the hunt was over, she grabbed her bag and exited the cottage. As she left, she stopped by the backyard to check on the birdcage, out of habit. She was certain that Phoebe would be in her cage, but she thought she should check, just to be safe.

“Phoebe...?”

Her face turned white with horror as she stood in front of the empty birdcage, its open door swinging in the breeze. Just as her hands started to shake, she heard another gunshot ring out from the forest.

* * *

Matthias was the first to make a kill. His bullet instantly ended the life of a deer that was running through the forest.

“Have you gained an interest in hunting land animals as well?” Riette asked as he applauded his cousin's successful shot. “That

would be a shame. I was looking forward to appreciating your famous ability to strike any bird midflight."

Meanwhile, the hunting dogs chased after a new target—a gray rabbit. Riette lifted his gun and took aim.

The deeper they went into the forest, the more their passion for hunting grew. Others in the group had killed a few birds, but so far Matthias had not.

*It's fine as long as it's not a bird, right?* he thought. At first, he didn't understand why this thought was popping into his head while he was hunting on his own hunting ground, and then it hit him—he didn't want to see Layla crying, even if that meant a boring hunting excursion.

The calm of the forest was shaken by the sound of the horses trotting over the thick layer of leaves covering the forest floor.

The group turned onto the path leading to the Schulter River. A lot of birds lived near the water, so this path had always been Matthias's favorite spot for hunting.

Glancing around, he noticed a familiar bird sitting on a tree branch. It was a white pigeon with a red string tied to its leg.

"Phoebe," he reflexively whispered. White vapor rose from his mouth as he spoke.

Soon, the rest of the hunting group turned their heads towards the same branch.

# Chapter 57:
## A Life's Worth

Layla ran frantically down the forest path, looking at each tree she passed, in the hopes of spotting Phoebe. The things in her bag made a loud clatter as she ran, panting.

The height of the autumn season had passed, and winter was approaching. Her lungs burned as she breathed in the cold, humid air, but she couldn't stop running. With every gunshot she heard, the image of Phoebe's bloodstained corpse flashed into her mind.

For all she knew, Phoebe had already been shot.

With each rusty-smelling lungful of cold air she struggled to breathe in, her fear increased. She started to wonder if the duke's promise that he wouldn't shoot Phoebe was meaningless. She thought back to when that cruel man had killed all those birds just to get her to come to him in the forest, and then had killed another bird right in front of her.

Why did she ever think she could trust him?

He had made it abundantly clear what sort of person he was, and yet she had believed that he would keep a promise. The thought made her feel deeply ashamed. *What's a promise to a man like him? Absolutely nothing. He probably doesn't even remember making the promise in the first place.*

Tears started to well up in her eyes as she turned onto the path leading to the Schulter River. If she couldn't find Phoebe, she wished that she could at least find the duke, so that she could beg him once more to show mercy to the pigeon. She knew it probably wouldn't do any good, but she had to do something. Soon her wish came true, and she saw the duke along with the rest of his hunting companions in the distance.

She tried to shout at them, but no sound came out, so she just kept running towards the group of noblemen on horseback. One of the men was aiming his hunting rifle at a white bird perched on a

tree branch. She recognized the man at once—it was the slayer of beautiful birds, Duke Herhardt.

*Phoebe!*

She tried to scream the pigeon's name, but all that came out was a hoarse whisper. Meanwhile, the duke pulled the trigger.

*Bang!*

The loud shot rang out, shaking the forest.

* * *

Riette and the rest of the group stared in bewildered silence. It seemed like time had stopped. Matthias lowered his gun. Its long barrel shone in the sunlight flowing through the branches.

“Wow, Matthias,” Riette said, finally breaking the silence. “I can't believe the illustrious Duke Herhardt missed a shot. It’s the most interesting thing that's happened this whole hunt!”

Riette's laughter soon spread to the rest of the group. Matthias's bullet had missed the pigeon, just grazing the tip of the branch on which it was perched. The bird had flown away at once, while the end of the branch had fallen to the ground.

Matthias had looked up at the sky with a smirk as the bird flew away. The white pigeon had flown towards the eastern end of the estate.

Just then, Riette was suddenly distracted from teasing his cousin by the sight of a young woman standing a fair distance up the path from them. “Hey, what's she doing here?”

Matthias turned his head and saw her at once. *Layla.* She was staring at him with a blank look on her face.

“L-Layla!” shouted the servants as they started to run towards her in alarm.

Her gaze remained fixed on Matthias. It wasn't her usual look of doubt or wariness. She was gazing at him straight on, as if he were the only person in the world.

“It's dangerous here, Layla,” one of the servants said. “I'm sure I told Mr. Remmer that His Grace was going hunting today...”

She finally snapped out of her daze when the servant grabbed her arm. “I'm s-sorry,” she said, still struggling to catch her breath. “I... I got confused about the date. I'm really sorry.” She quickly lowered her gaze and looked at her feet.

The servants told her she should leave right away, then they returned to their spots. Seemingly uninterested in the commotion, the duke pulled his horse's reins.

Layla kept looking at him for a while longer, even though she knew she needed to leave. The duke set off towards the western end of the estate, away from the direction in which Phoebe had flown.

Layla's eyes glistened with unfallen tears. With those eyes, she had witnessed the duke's perfect marksmanship many times before. He never missed. Thus, she knew that it hadn't been a mistake that his bullet had missed Phoebe. He had intentionally aimed at the branch so that Phoebe would be startled and fly far away, where she would be safe from the others' guns as well.

Before turning down a bend in the path, the duke looked back over his shoulder. He was so far away, it was hard to make out any details, but Layla could intuitively sense that he was looking into her eyes.

Once he was out of sight, she turned around and started slowly trudging back up the path she had frantically run down. Now that her anxiety was gone, her whole body felt limp. She felt like a ghost floating along above the ground.

She vaguely recalled having a similar feeling once before. Hazy images started to flash through her mind of herself walking late one night with a similar feeling of weightlessness, but she decided not to pursue the memory. She knew nothing good would come of recalling it. Instead, she held tightly onto the strap of her bag and kept plodding forward.

Her vision became clear again, and she was soon able to see the cottage up ahead. She reached the porch, collapsed into one of its chairs, and let out a long sigh.

The duke had kept his promise. That fact was as clear as the

bright, cloudless sky up above.

* * *

Layla was sitting silently at the desk in her bedroom. Suddenly, there was a tapping at the window. She reflexively got up and went to the window.

“Phoebe!” she exclaimed, opening the window.

As soon as she did this, she was startled to see someone standing behind the bird—Duke Herhardt. She quickly put her hands over her mouth to stop herself from screaming. Bill was in the front yard chopping firewood. If she were to scream, he would come running at once.

She closed and locked the door of her room, then returned to the open window. She detected the faint scent of blood wafting off his hunting outfit. She looked closer and saw that the front of his hunting jacket was splotched with blood.

“Your pigeon is over there,” he said, looking at the other end of the windowsill, where Phoebe was calmly perched.

Suppressing the urge to cry out, Layla gazed through the window at the duke. His dark-brown horse was standing obediently behind its master. Beyond them, the sky had darkened with the approach of evening. The clear, deep blue color matched the duke's eyes.

“Have you thought about it?” he suddenly asked, snapping Layla out of her reverie. He pointed at Phoebe with his chin and asked, “Have you thought about how you're going to return the favor?”

“Well...” She gulped, flustered by the question. “Can you really call it a favor when all you did was keep your promise?”

He snickered.

“Of c-course,” she continued, “I'm certainly grateful that you did.”

“Just grateful?”

“And I think that you're an honorable gentleman who knows how to keep his promises.”

“Didn't you say you were taking back what you had said about

me being a gentleman?" he asked, putting his elbow on the windowsill and resting his chin on his hand.

"That was... rash of me. I spoke too soon."

She struggled to find the right words as she felt she was digging herself even deeper with each thing she said.

"So, I was a gentleman, and then I wasn't one, and now I'm back to being one again, is that it?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Then does that mean you're a queen?"

"Pardon...?" she replied, furrowing her brow. After a moment she remembered what he was talking about. "Ah...!"

After he had chased her to the stream, she had shouted that if he were a gentleman, she was a queen.

She considered pretending that she didn't remember, but her cheeks had already started to turn red. She didn't know why she had been unable to control her temper in front of him. It was only natural that her words would come back around to embarrass her now. When anyone else treated her badly, she had no trouble grinning and bearing it. Yet for some reason, with the duke, she couldn't help but talk back.

"I'm sorry for what I said that day," she hesitantly said. "And I sincerely thank you for keeping your promise."

As she spoke, Bill's voice rang out from the front yard as he grunted while chopping firewood. Layla felt unbearably tense, but the duke looked completely relaxed.

"What should I do, Layla?" he asked, reaching through the window and grabbing her chin. "I didn't keep my promise just to hear you blurt out a forced apology."

A sense of foreboding swept over Layla and she tried to step back, but as always the duke was faster and stronger than her. Before she knew it, her glasses had come off, and her vision was filled with the blurred image of the duke's face.

Suddenly she felt his lips against hers. She struggled wildly, but he grabbed a big handful of her hair to keep her still. Frozen in

place by the shock, she groaned under the excruciating pain. Meanwhile, his hot tongue burrowed its way into her mouth.

Bill's grunts and the sound of his axes splitting firewood were still audible in the background.

Layla tried to push Matthias's shoulder away, but all that happened was that kissed her more intensely. It felt a little different from the incident the previous summer that had left scars deep in her heart. Back then, he had seemed ferocious, as if he were going to eat her alive. Now he was being slower and gentler as he sucked on her lips and tongue.

Soon he loosened his grip on her hair, giving her a chance to pull away from him. As she tried to catch her breath, she could smell his usual minty scent, mixed with the smell of animal blood. Shuddering, she shut her mouth tight, but he wasn't going to give up easily.

“Is that all that Phoebe's life is worth to you?” he quietly asked in a vaguely playful tone.

But she was in no emotional state to receive his jest in the manner he intended it. Feeling like all the blood in her body was frozen stiff, she could do nothing but stare blankly at him. In her distracted state, she soon forgot to keep her lips pressed tightly together, and she opened her mouth to catch her breath.

Matthias, who had been waiting for the opportunity, instantly pulled her close to him again. Grabbing her chin so firmly that it felt like he was going to crush it, he stuck his tongue back into her mouth. She felt his tongue slowly, stubbornly exploring every last spot inside her mouth. She would have preferred the pain of him clutching her hair to these odd sensations.

Meanwhile, Bill's grunts continued in the background.

Each time Matthias sucked on her tongue or twisted his own inside her mouth, she felt a moan rising involuntarily from deep inside her. She found this highly disturbing, but her mind was no longer in control of her body. Eventually all her strength emptied away, and the arm she had been trying to push him away with

draped limply over his shoulder.

As her moans began to be punctuated by meek sobs, he let her pull away, although he kept his hand on her face. His lips, sloppy with saliva, gleamed even in the darkness. Realizing that her own lips probably looked the same, she felt like collapsing to the ground.

“Layla!”

The sudden sound of Bill shouting her name snapped her out of her daze.

“Layla! Could you bring me a glass of cold water?”

*Respond,* she thought. *I have to respond.*

While she floundered, unsure what to do, Matthias whipped out his handkerchief and started slowly wiping his lips. He then pulled her face towards him and wiped off her lips as well. After retrieving her eyeglasses for her and putting them back on her face, he finally let go of her.

The sound of firewood splitting stopped as Bill grew concerned over her lack of response. “Layla?”

Matthias placed his handkerchief in her trembling hand and quietly said, “Bring this back to me after you wash it.” He then turned around and suavely mounted his horse.

“Hey, Layla! Is something wrong?”

She heard the clomping sound of Bill's steps as he entered the cottage and walked towards her room. She quickly closed the window and drew the curtains, then rushed to the door and opened it. Bill was already standing on the other side.

“I'm sorry, Uncle Bill. I just... dozed off for a bit,” she said, hurriedly trying to fix her disheveled hair.

“I thought something bad had happened to you again,” Bill said.

“Dinner... I, uh... I'll get started on dinner right away.”

“There's no rush. Take your time,” he said, letting out a relieved chuckle before heading back to the front yard to finish his work.

Once she heard the front door shut, she limply collapsed to the floor. The duke's handkerchief fluttered down next to her.

# Chapter 58:
## Play With Me

A hollow laugh escaped the principal's thin lips. Layla was sitting across from him, looking at him with a polite but confident expression.

“Are you serious, Miss Llewellyn?”

“Yes. It's what I want to do.”

The solemnness of her response suggested that her request was more than a passing thought. After all, she was volunteering to be transferred to a school in a distant location. She wasn't the type to make such a decision rashly.

“I don't understand,” the principal said. “Isn't this the closest school to your home?”

Layla, the young teacher who rode her bicycle to school every day, was still a novice, but she was a hard worker and was improving quickly. Even if the principal occasionally found faults with her, he was generally pleased with her performance.

And considering her circumstances, it seemed like the school at which she was currently teaching was the best school for her in numerous respects.

“There are no vacant spots for new teachers in any of the other schools in Karlsbar,” he told her. “That means you'll have to travel all the way to another city if you want to transfer schools. You understand this, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

“If you have some problem with this school, please tell me. If it's a problem that can be fixed, I'd be happy to do so.”

“No, it's nothing like that. Everyone here has treated me well, and I love my students. I just...”

“You just what?”

She wavered for a moment, then gave the response she had prepared. “I just want to broaden my horizons, and experience a

bigger city."

The principal chuckled quietly again. It was only natural that he would. After all, among cities in the Berg Empire, Karlsbar was one of the biggest and most prosperous. It was as well developed as the capital. However, Layla hadn't been able to think of a better excuse. Luckily, the principal didn't question her any further. Nodding, he said, "There are plenty of teachers looking for positions in Karlsbar, so it won't be hard for me to find a replacement for you here. Nonetheless, I'd advise you to think carefully about this decision. You have until next semester to make up your mind."

Layla had already thought carefully about the decision, and was fairly certain her mind wasn't going to change, but she graciously accepted the principal's advice. After leaving his office and returning to her classroom, she let out a long sigh.

The children had gone home already, so the room was empty. She leaned against the wall next to the window. The oak tree outside the window had already lost almost all its leaves. The shadow of its slender branches extended into the window and fell across her brow.

After several days in which she had been very distracted and made many foolish mistakes at work, and had barely been able to sleep, she had finally come to a decision: *"I should leave Arvis."*

As much as she cherished living with Uncle Bill, losing Kyle had taught her a lesson. She had learned that sometimes, trying to keep a hold of something could cause more damage than it was worth. Thus, she had decided to go back to her original plan.

If she got a teaching position in a neighboring city, she could still see Bill on the weekends. Staying at a boarding house would cost money, which could mean that she would have to wait even longer before she could go to college. This was fine with her, however, if it meant that she could leave Arvis, and be free of the duke.

"It'll be all right," she muttered with a melancholy smile on her face as she walked to her desk.

Thinking back on her early childhood, when she had lost her

parents and been passed around among relatives' homes, she felt confident that she could now endure anything. She was now an adult, and she had her beloved Uncle Bill, so everything would be all right. *Yes, it will all be fine.*

Without thinking about it, she started rubbing her lips with the back of her hand. Then she put on her coat and grabbed her bag. Glancing inside the bag, she frowned as she saw the duke's handkerchief, which had been in there for several days now. She shook her head to rid herself of the bad feeling, and left. Once outside, she got onto her bicycle and started pedaling at her usual brisk pace.

Riette spotted her as he turned onto the road leading to Arvis. She was standing with her hands behind her back next to her bicycle, which she had propped against a tree. It looked like she was waiting for someone. Who could that someone be?

Feeling like he knew the answer, Riette smiled and pulled his car over to the side of the road. Layla, who had been tapping her foot as she stood, turned her head towards him. When she saw a different face from the one she was waiting for, she staggered backward uneasily.

“Hello, Miss Llewellyn,” Riette said as he leaned against the door of his car, smiling.

Layla frantically looked around, then took another step backward. After a long pause, she nervously replied, “Hello, Marquess Lindman.”

“What are you doing here?”

She furrowed her brow, trying to think of a response, but ended up remaining silent.

Taking that silence as confirmation of his earlier guess, Riette laughed again. “It couldn't be the doctor's son since he doesn't live around here anymore. Would it happen to be Duke Herhardt, then?”

Layla raised her head and looked at him. The embarrassment and shame she was feeling were visible in her scowling eyes and

reddening cheeks.

“I'm talking about the man you're waiting for, Miss Llewellyn. It's Matthias, isn't it?” He approached her and stood directly in front of her with his hands behind his back.

Layla's clammy hand clutched the strap of her bag tightly. She was there to return the duke's handkerchief to him. She felt like she was carrying a ticking time bomb. She hadn't wanted to visit the duke at his mansion, so she had decided to wait for him at this spot on the road.

“Why aren't you answering me?” Riette asked. “Ah. It must be because I hit the nail on the head.”

“Please step aside, Marquess Lindman,” she said, putting her bag behind her back to hide it from him as she started walking away.

However, Riette quickly stepped in front of her again to block her path. “Leaving so soon? But you haven't met with Matthias yet.”

“Please get out of my way!”

“Do you know where the duke that you were so patiently waiting for has gone?” Riette clicked his tongue remorsefully as he put his hand on her shoulder. “I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Miss Llewellyn, but Duke Herhardt has gone to pick up his fiancée.”

Riette had initially intended only to lightly tease Layla, but now she was starting to get on his nerves. He could tell that she had no idea where he was, and was thus waiting on the side of the road in the hopes that he would be passing by eventually. Riette found this behavior both irritating and pathetic, but soon he started to pity her, as he realized that her plight was similar to his.

When he had heard that Claudine would be visiting Arvis and Matthias was going out to pick her up, he had waved goodbye and then borrowed one of the Herhardts' cars to drive himself around aimlessly. He wondered if she was feeling the same kind of loneliness as he was. This made him feel a sort of kinship with her.

As she tried to turn and get past him, he stepped in front of her again and grabbed her bicycle's handlebars. “Don't you find Matthias a little... boring?” he asked. “He's basically treating you

like you're his mistress."

"Wh-what...?"

"His mistress. What? Is it too crude a term?" he asked, smiling as he observed the shocked look on her face. "I'm sorry if I've offended you, Miss Llewellyn."

"Let go of my bike!"

"I must say, though, I feel a bit offended as well. Given that you like the doctor's son and Duke Herhardt both so much, I can't help but feel a little hurt that you don't like me." He then let go of the handlebars, and while Layla was distracted, he grabbed her bag from her.

Her face went ashen and she ran at him to try to get the bag back.

"I don't get it. What's not to like about me?" He lifted the bag above his head. "I don't know about the doctor's son, but I certainly know I'm more fun than Matthias."

"Give me back my bag!"

"And Matthias and I look pretty similar. Don't you think? And while I don't have the wealth of the House of Herhardt behind me, I'm well off enough to keep you happy, Miss Llewellyn."

Intent on getting her bag back, Layla boldly started grabbing at his arms. Her pursed lips were quivering.

"You should let the boring duke spend time with his equally boring fiancée and play with me, Miss Llewellyn."

She continued frantically trying to get her bag back, as if there were some sort of valuable treasure inside.

He finally handed it back to her, snickering. She wrapped her arms protectively around the bag, then quickly got onto her bicycle and started riding away, not realizing that she was going in the wrong direction, away from Arvis. She also didn't realize, or didn't want to acknowledge, that one of her shoes had fallen off.

"I'm sorry, Miss Llewellyn. I'll be nice!" he shouted.

Despite his plea, she didn't stop riding. Rather, she started pedaling even faster.

Riette let out a sigh, then picked up the shoe from the ground and started chasing after her. She turned a corner, and soon afterward he heard a metallic screech, followed by the dull thud of a collision.

He rushed to the source of the sounds, and found a young woman scrunched up on the ground, in front of a stopped black car. The woman, of course, was Layla.

As Riette stood, staring, people started to get out of the car. First, the chauffeur and Mark Evers ran over to see how Layla was doing after the impact. Then Matthias and Claudine got out of the back seats.

“Goodness! Layla!” Claudine shouted.

Matthias looked at Layla, who was still clutching her bag against her chest as she lay on the ground, and then he shifted his gaze to Riette, who was standing a few paces off, illuminated by the car's headlights.

Luckily, it wasn't a serious accident. Despite having been struck quite hard and falling to the ground, Layla was able to stand up on her own. When asked if she wanted to be taken to the hospital, she stubbornly shook her head.

After confirming that she was in good enough condition to ride her bicycle, Matthias called an end to the commotion. “We should get going as well,” he calmly said to the rest of the people, who were looking worriedly in the direction Layla had ridden off in. He seemed wholly uninterested in why Layla had been riding her bicycle there on the road, or why Riette had been following behind her.

“Yes, let's go,” Claudine replied, quickly glancing at Riette.

That was it. Matthias and Claudine got back into the car, while the embarrassed-looking Riette walked back over to his car, which was parked by the beginning of Platanus Road. The two cars quickly overtook Layla and passed through Arvis's gate.

“It seemed like she got hit pretty hard. It's very lucky that she's not injured,” Claudine said, sighing as she glanced out the window.

She was normally quite calm, but she had been scared out of her wits when Layla had appeared out of nowhere, looking like an animal running from a predator before getting hit by the car.

When she had then seen Riette show up with one of Layla's shoes in his hand, she had struggled to keep her emotions from showing on her face. She had never thought that Riette would have been so rash and impetuous.

She turned to scrutinize Matthias's face for some reaction. However, he was showing no emotion at all. He was showing no concern for Layla, or for the man who had caused her to get hurt. He had the same neutral expression on his face as always.

Reflecting on this, Claudine started to feel sorry for Layla. Just then, the car came to a stop in front of the mansion.

# Chapter 59:
## An Outstanding Adult

Matthias escorted Claudine into the drawing room, where his mother and grandmother were waiting, along with Riette.

Riette had started to wonder if Claudine was mistaken about Matthias's interest in Layla. If Matthias was really as enamored with Layla as Claudine said, it made no sense that he was showing no concern over the accident she had been involved in. Thus, even though he knew that pretending like the incident had never happened would have been the most sensible option, he had decided to bring up Layla in front of Matthias.

“I happened to see her waiting on the side of the road, so I thought I'd say hello, but she seemed very timid,” Riette casually said as he sat down across from Matthias.

They had just come from dinner, which had been served a bit early, as soon as Matthias had arrived with Claudine. Claudine remained in the drawing room, sipping tea with Lady Herhardt and Dowager Herhardt, while Riette and Matthias had gone upstairs to the latter's study.

“Layla, I mean,” Riette added in a soft tone, smiling at Matthias.

Riette really hadn't been trying to upset the poor young woman, he had just wanted to tease her a bit.

“Ah,” Matthias replied, as if this were the first time he had thought about the incident since it had happened. He stared at Riette for a moment, then surprisingly he started laughing. The laughter was much too cheerful and innocent sounding not to be real. “I guess even a ladies' man like you can get rejected, huh?”

“What?”

“Serves you right!” Matthias laughed a bit more, then took a cigarette from the silver box on the table and lit it before offering one to Riette.

While Riette was lighting his cigarette, Matthias leaned back into

his chair, still chuckling. Eventually, Riette let out a hollow laugh as well. He was starting to sincerely pity Layla, now that he was witnessing Matthias's attitude towards her. “I suppose it wasn't one of my best moments,” he said, leaning back in his chair as well. He started to feel like he and Claudine had been fooled.

*“That girl, don't you think she's quite similar to the canary the duke keeps in his room?”* Claudine had asked one afternoon the previous summer, giggling as she looked out the window at Layla, who had just finished working in the garden and was walking back towards the cottage.

The way her thick blonde hair bounced with each lively step she took really had made her resemble Matthias's little bird.

*“You're not trying to suggest that Matthias took that canary as a pet because of her, are you?”* Riette had asked in disbelief.

Claudine had simply smiled in response, which Riette had taken as a “yes.”

Claudine was a highly rational person, so Riette knew that she wouldn't have made such a judgment without thorough consideration. And it was quite suspicious that Matthias, who had previously seen birds as nothing but a form of moving target, had suddenly taken one in as a beloved pet.

Once she had pointed this out to Riette, he had seen her point. He had been convinced even further when she had mentioned the plan that Matthias had carried out to separate Layla from Kyle Ettman. Thus, he was certain that Claudine was right about Matthias's feelings for Layla.

If that was the case, though, why was he acting with such nonchalance about her now? The more Riette thought about this, the more confused he felt about the whole thing. Could any man really act so indifferently when the woman he had feelings for was hit by a car? If Claudine wasn't mistaken about his feelings, could it be that he had already ended his relationship with Layla? But then, why was he still keeping the pet canary?

“Riette von Lindman,” Matthias said as he calmly ashed his

cigarette.

Riette quickly wiped the concerned, suspicious look from his face and faced his cousin.

“If you want to create a scandal, I'd prefer it if you would do it at your own estate,” Matthias said, smiling. “I try to keep things here at Arvis as orderly as possible, you see.” He stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette and lit himself a new one, keeping his eyes fixed on Riette the whole time. He didn't look jealous or angry. Rather, he had a look on his face like that of an innocent child.

Once again, Riette suddenly recalled the chilling words an officer had said to him: *“Your cousin is a gentlemanly demon.”* He gulped nervously, and his hand started shaking as he held his cigarette.

“I'm sure you understand that better than anyone,” Matthias quietly added before turning his gaze away.

As Riette watched his cousin take a slow drag from his cigarette, the only emotion he could detect was some slight fatigue.

Ultimately, he came to the same conclusion everyone did when they pondered over Matthias: *I don't understand him.* He let out a smoke-filled sigh. *If I want to resolve my doubts about him, it looks like I'll need to find some way to provoke him further. But if I do figure something out about him, will it be useful to Claudine?* Contemplating this new question, Riette gulped again.

* * *

The stillness of the dark bedroom was suddenly disturbed by the sound of Phoebe pecking at the window. Normally Layla would have rushed over to the window and opened it, but this time she remained curled up in bed, staring into space. Her slowly blinking eyes looked empty.

Several minutes passed before she came out of her daze. It took even longer before she was able to lift herself up out of bed. She didn't have any cuts or broken bones, but the spots on the left side of her back and shoulder where the car had hit her hurt immensely. She wanted to sleep, but she was in too much pain, and the pain

only seemed to be increasing with the passage of time.

Using only her right hand, she slowly opened the window. There was a note tied to Phoebe's leg. She was sure it was from Duke Herhardt.

She gently petted Phoebe's soft feathers, then removed the note. Phoebe then went straight to her cage in the backyard without waiting to be fed. Presumably the duke had fed her already.

Layla closed the window and carefully sat down on the foot of her bed.

She could barely remember how the accident had occurred, or how she had made it back to the cottage. She remembered desperately trying to escape from Marquess Lindman, then being blinded by a car's headlights, and then feeling a vague, painful jolt through her whole body.

Thinking back on this, she took in a deep breath and closed her eyes.

As painful as the impact had been, she had forgotten the pain the moment she had realized that the car that hit her had been carrying Duke Herhardt and Claudine. She couldn't remember anything else, other than sad embarrassment and a strong desire to get away as quickly as possible.

She rubbed her tear-filled eyes and put on her glasses. After hesitating for a moment longer, she unfurled the note and read the typically cold message the duke had written.

*You still need to bring me my handkerchief, Layla. If you don't come to me, I could also come to you.*

She crumpled up the note with one hand and tossed it under her bed. As she lay back down in bed and curled up her aching body again, she felt like sobbing, but instead she broke into laughter. She removed her glasses and tossed them carelessly aside, then buried her head deep in the pillow. She felt like she was going crazy.

*If only I could run away to some distant place. Somewhere far, far away from him.*

As much as she fantasized about escaping, reality wasn't changing. She was still at Arvis, and it seemed like she could never escape that man. If she didn't go to him, he would come looking for her. He had done so in the past, and he was ready to do so again. He wouldn't care if Uncle Bill caught him. If that were to happen, then Uncle Bill would...

Her train of thought was suddenly interrupted as she recalled the simple but warm words Bill had said to her: *"I know that you'll become an outstanding adult."* No matter what others said, Bill had always believed in her, and had always been proud of her. She knew this well.

Her thoughts then shifted to Marquess Lindman referring to her as the duke's mistress. Immediately her heart started pounding uneasily.

Soon she couldn't take it, and she got up out of bed again. She opened her bag, which she had tossed onto her desk, grabbed the handkerchief out of it, and left her room at once. She could hear the sound of Bill's snoring coming from his room. He had gone straight to bed after dinner.

Without even putting on a shawl, she headed out into the cold night air. Everything was blurry without her glasses, but she didn't care about that at the moment. She was too occupied by her hatred for the duke.

She hated him so much, that her heart felt like it was going to burst. She knew it wasn't fair to blame the duke for the accident when it had really been Marquess Lindman's fault, but she didn't feel like being fair to the duke. After all, he wasn't fair to her.

The moon was hidden behind clouds, so the night was very dark, but she walked through the forest freely. She increased her pace as she started to near the cabin on the river. It was so cold, thick plumes of white steam escaped her mouth with every breath, but her cheeks were flushed as she frantically walked at nearly a running pace.

"You came," a voice in the dark said.

She stopped in her tracks. It was the duke. He was leaning against the railing of the cabin's exterior stairway, looking down at her.

“I was just about to give up and leave.” He started to walk down towards her. He seemed completely at ease. He was even smiling. He stopped one pace away from her.

The wind blowing in from the river shook her disheveled hair and her skirt.

Glancing at what she was wearing, he frowned. “Aren't you cold?”

She scoffed at his show of concern, then held out his handkerchief with a trembling hand. “Here. It's your handkerchief.”

“Layla.”

“Goodbye, Your Grace. I don't want to see you again like this. Never again.” She turned around and started walking away. Her confident steps echoed in the cold night. She felt like crying from the pain and the cold, so she bit down on the inside of her cheek to stop herself.

“Wait right there,” the duke commanded.

She tried to start running, but her frigid legs wouldn't cooperate.

“Layla.” His voice sounded louder as he approached from behind her. “Layla!”

He placed his hand on her left shoulder. She let out a shriek and pushed his hand away.

Narrowing his eyes, he moved closer and wrapped his arms around her, much too quickly for her to dodge him.

“No! Stop! Let me go!”

As she struggled vainly to get free, he lifted her up and slung her over his shoulder like she were a sack of potatoes.

Even as she beat and scratched at his back, he walked unfazed up the stairway. Her cries grew louder as he carried her through the second-floor doorway, but there was no one around to hear her.

He walked in the opposite direction from the drawing room, and opened the door of the bedroom.

# Chapter 60:
## I Won't Hurt You

When her back touched the soft surface of the bed, Layla realized where she was and what was about to happen. "N-no! Go away! Stop!" she shouted, flailing about, ignoring the pain throughout her body. The crisp sheets of the rarely used bed were wrinkled instantly.

"Hold still," Matthias said, grabbing her arm. It was her injured arm. She screamed out in pain. He frowned and let go.

She immediately curled up her body to move away from him, almost falling off the bed in the process. He quickly pulled her towards him to keep her from falling, whereupon she started flailing about again.

"Let go! Let go of me!" she shouted.

"If you keep thrashing around, your pain will only increase," he said.

"No! No! No!" she shouted, trying to push him away.

Her stubborn resistance grated on his nerves. He realized then that he was taking out his anger on her, when the person he was really angry at was that miserable cousin of his, Riette von Lindman.

He paused to let himself calm down, and she immediately pushed herself away from him. As he watched her, desperately crawling over the disheveled sheets of the bed to get away from him, he let out a chuckle that sounded almost like a sigh.

He was just worried about her injured body. He felt he understood her mind well enough to know that she would never tell Bill Remmer about the accident or her injuries. This had concerned him, so he had brought some medicine and bandages to the cabin. Then he had written that pathetic note and tied it to the pigeon's leg in order to lure her to the cabin.

He chuckled again. By now she had crawled to the edge of the

bed. Before she could get off the bed, however, he lifted her up and placed her back in the middle. He did it so fast, that she didn't have time to scream.

“Don't do this, please,” she pleaded, vainly struggling to get free.

He got on top of her, straddling her waist, and pinned her arms down. She continued to writhe for a moment like a live butterfly pinned and wriggling on the wall, before a horrible feeling of powerlessness overtook her and she started sobbing. “Ow... It h-hurts…” She wasn't lying. Even as she was paralyzed with fear, the pain in her back and shoulder kept increasing. “Your Grace, you're hurting me.” Looking at the duke's face with her tear-soaked eyes, she started sobbing even louder.

As if he were relishing the sight, he simply gazed down at her, not moving at all. Tilting his head slightly, he quietly asked, “Did Riette touch you?”

As he spoke, his long bangs shook, revealing his deep-blue eyes.

Even in the midst of her desperate sobbing, she reflexively shook her head. She hated what Marquess Lindman had done, and she hated that the duke had found out about it. “He didn't touch me... He approached me and was teasing me... so I ran away in fright... That was it.”

Matthias listened carefully to her faltering words. She started calming down, then started sobbing even more loudly, then calmed down again. Exhausted, she stared into space, sniffling occasionally, her tear-covered face glistening.

Still holding down her arms, he gradually slid his hands towards her small hands and gripped them gently.

“Hold still, Layla.”

As his fingers slowly interlocked with hers, her slack body flinched and went stiff with fear.

Lowering his head slightly, he whispered, “I won't hurt you.”

She quietly considered the situation she was in. There was a man on top of her. She was being firmly held down by him. The two of them were alone in a remote cabin by the river. She considered

trying to push him off of her and making a dash for the door, but quickly realized she wouldn't be able to escape. This only intensified the despair she was feeling.

“Really...?” she asked, even though she knew she sounded foolish.

At this moment, as ridiculous as it seemed, her only hope was the duke. He had now completely let go of her hands and was just looking at her. Her only hope was that he might show her some slight mercy.

When he didn't answer her question, she looked at him with an earnest look in her eyes. She had stopped crying, but her moist eyelashes were still quivering.

He gazed at her face for a while longer, then nodded his head. She breathed a sigh of relief.

He reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved his handkerchief. Even though her arms were now free, she remained still, staring intently at him in the hopes that he would remember his promise.

He slowly started to wipe the tears from her face with the handkerchief. Startled, she tried to turn away, but he grabbed her chin and made her stay facing him. Her emerald eyes looked even more beautiful moistened like this.

He wiped the sweat from her forehead and hairline, then he got off of her and stood up. After lying still as a corpse while she endured him wiping her face, she now cautiously shifted her gaze.

He picked up a box from the bedside table and turned towards her. It was a first-aid kit. “Let me see your wounds,” he said as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

She shook her head. “It's okay. I'm not injured.”

“You said you were hurting.”

“That was because...” She trailed off and averted her eyes.

Rather than make her turn towards him again, he undid the button on one of the sleeves of her blouse, and swiftly rolled the sleeve up past her elbow. She flailed her arm to try to get him to stop.

“I guess it's not your arm, then,” he said in a flat tone. He then grasped the hem of her skirt, which was already above her knees, and made as if he were about to pull it up further.

“My b-back! It's my back that hurts!” she urgently shouted, afraid that otherwise he would strip her naked to find her wounds. “My shoulder and my back are a little hurt. But you don't need to-”

“Take off your blouse,” he said.

She sat up in shock and shook her head, but he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

“If you don't want me to see, I'll call a doctor.” He looked at her with narrowed eyes as he drummed on the first-aid box with his fingers. “Dr. Ettman, that is.”

Upon hearing this, she shook her head even more vehemently. She would rather fling herself into the river than let Kyle's father see her lying on the duke's bed in her current state.

“Make your choice, Layla,” he said in a kind, gentle voice. “You can take off your blouse, or you can see Dr. Ettman. It's up to you.”

* * *

Even though she only had one real option, Layla remained silent for a long while.

Matthias gladly waited, despite the tedium.

He liked to watch her eyes watching him. They were wet with tears, and yet they were filled with a determination not to cry again. They were beautiful and had a pleading look that contained both trust and fearful doubt.

Suddenly, she shut her eyes, and spoke a single word: “Promise...?”

The duke would do whatever he wanted to get his way. She knew this well. He had done so many times in the past, and she was sure he would do so now as well. All her attempts to resist would only lengthen the time she had to endure with him, even if this meant enduring the very worst thing he could do.

As she felt her utter helplessness anew, she once more burst into

tears. Without making any sound this time, she silently shed tears, which flowed down onto her blouse. He continued to sit back and watch her.

*He must be happy,* she thought, *seeing me cry again like this.* Biting her lip and trying to stifle her sniffles, she turned her back to him. Her tears grew thicker as she started to unbutton her blouse. She wanted to hide the tears from him, even if she could hide nothing else, so she lowered her head as she removed her blouse.

It didn't take long for the smooth fabric to slide down her even smoother skin, but to him, it seemed to take ages. He took in every tiny detail—her fragile, slender neck and shoulders, the soft curve of her spine, and the bruises staining her pale skin.

He stared at her bruised, swollen back for a long while. He could see why she had been crying and saying that she was in pain. The dark bruises defiling her white skin ran from her shoulder blade down to her waist.

His Adam's apple twitched as he gulped. He was shocked to the point of pity as he thought about her getting up from the accident in this state and riding her bicycle away.

*You would have kept these bruises hidden and suffered all by yourself if I had let you,* he thought. As he contemplated this, a strong feeling similar to anger welled up inside of him. To rid himself of the emotion, he extended his hand towards her bruise-covered back.

She let out a yelp the moment he touched her. “Ah...!”

“Tell me if there are any spots that hurt more than others,” he said as he tried touching each bone and muscle to check for injuries.

Whenever she moaned, he would stop and wait. Fortunately, she was still able to move her shoulders and arms. Her ribs and spine seemed unharmed as well. His wrinkled brow smoothed over with relief as he confirmed this.

He thought about saying her name, then changed his mind and wrapped his hand around her left shoulder joint. She was quivering, with her head still lowered.

As if he were comforting a small, frightened animal, he gently caressed her bruised body. To the eye, she looked slender enough that he had wondered if she was getting enough to eat, but to the touch, her body felt healthy and supple. Overcome by how small and helpless she seemed, her name quietly escaped his lips: “Layla.”

She flinched and raised her head at the sound of her name. There was a large mirror with a golden frame hanging on the wall above the fireplace. As she looked up, she saw herself reflected in that mirror and was filled with shame.

Then, the duke looked into the mirror and locked eyes with her. They were the same blue eyes that she had seen countless times before, and yet now they felt different and unfamiliar. And so, even as she quaked with trepidation, she didn't avoid his gaze.

She continued to gaze into his eyes for a long time, all the while wondering why she didn't feel compelled to look away. They looked pure and innocent.

He let out a self-deprecating snicker and shifted his gaze back to her bruised shoulder.

His body felt hot, and his lips were starting to feel dry. Only when he looked back up and saw her in the mirror again did he realize that he had been the one to avert his eyes, not her. It was the first time that this had happened in all the years he had known her.

*Damn it...* he thought, while his body continued to heat up. He felt like sighing, but instead, he lowered his head towards her shoulder and kissed it.

Perhaps he had done this to rid himself of the strange feelings welling up inside him. Perhaps he had done it to soothe her wounds. Either way, it wasn't the type of thing he would normally do, but he didn't care.

As she struggled to try to move her body away from him, he softly whispered in her ear, “It's all right.” His voice didn't sound like it usually did. It was softer and more passionate.

Unable to stand to look in the mirror anymore, she quickly

averted her eyes. She then saw his large hand holding her bare waist. She tried to wriggle out of his grip, but it was no use. He firmly grasped her hand and carefully continued to kiss her body.

She shut her eyes.

His lips and breath against her aching wounds felt as soft as a feather.

# Chapter 61:
## Benefit Performance

After several peaceful days, Layla's memories of that night had grown hazy, as if it had been no more than a dream.

Marquess Lindman had gone back to his own estate, and Matthias had not sent any coercive notes or shown up at the cottage.

Meanwhile, the season had also shifted.

Layla opened the window and was immediately greeted by a cold breeze full of the scents of winter. She let the breeze wash over her for a moment, not worrying about how cold it was. She looked out at Arvis's forest, which was permeated with winter's distinctive silver-white sunshine.

As her fingers started to get cold, she closed the window and turned around. The children from her school were putting on a benefit performance at the public hall downtown today, so it took her a bit longer than usual to get ready. Even though the children were the ones who would be on stage, many of the region's most important VIPs would be in attendance, so she needed to look her best so she could make a good impression.

*"Please try to look like a dignified teacher. All right, Miss Llewellyn?"* the principal had said at the previous day's meeting, adding that he hoped she wouldn't ride her bicycle to the benefit.

"What's wrong with my bike?" she muttered as she braided her hair. After a full semester's worth of practice, she was able to braid her hair very neatly with ease.

She finished braiding her hair and admired her work in the mirror. Suddenly, her memory flashed back to what the duke had said that beautiful autumn day on Platanus Road: *"That hairstyle doesn't suit you."* She flinched as if she were face-to-face with the real duke and turned away from the mirror.

Then she recalled what he had said about her hairstyle a short while later: *"It's pretty. It's like a bird's wings."* This comment had

flustered her even more than the criticism preceding it. He had uttered it with a blank expression.

She fiddled with her comb for a while, then looked in the mirror again. Her bruises had mostly faded away by now, but she still remembered certain things from that night clearly.

The duke had kept his promise. It had felt strange when he had kissed her wounds, but before long, he had stopped, and proceeded to calmly dress them. Showing as much careful delicacy as a doctor treating a patient, he had rubbed ointment on the bruises and gently wrapped a bandage around her tender shoulder.

Just as her mind was arriving at the point in her memories when she had put her blouse back on and faced him, she quickly stood up and got the dress and high-heeled shoes she had saved up to buy and put them on. *I can't believe I have to wear these uncomfortable shoes all day...* Her heels were already aching within seconds of putting them on.

“You look so pretty, Layla,” Bill said when she appeared in the kitchen. “You're going to be the prettiest lady at the public hall tonight.”

“I don't know, Uncle Bill, there are going to be lots of noblewomen in attendance...”

“So what? No matter what sorts of fancy jewelry they have on, they won't compare to you.”

“I'm glad you think so,” she said, giggling as she sat down across from him.

“Oh, Layla. You know that, uh... that necklace? How about wearing it tonight?” he asked, looking at her unadorned neck.

“Necklace? Ah! The necklace you got me?”

“Yeah. You wore it to the party at the duke's mansion last year. I think it would match the outfit you have on, right? I'm not saying you have to wear it, but I certainly wouldn't mind if you did.”

Bill knew nothing about women's fashion, but he vividly remembered how dazzlingly beautiful Layla had looked the night of the party. She had looked like a princess, even if only for one night,

and he cherished the memory.

Gladly taking his suggestion, Layla went back to her room, dug deep into her closet to find the necklace, and returned to the kitchen with it on. “How do I look, Uncle Bill?” she asked, standing before him with her hands behind her back.

He chuckled. “Be careful of crows, Layla. You're sparkling so brightly, I'm worried one of them is going to snatch you away in its beak!”

* * *

*Hmm, she's heading to work on foot today.* Matthias grinned as he saw someone far in the distance, past the mansion's large rose garden, walking along the path from the hunting ground. Even at such a distance, he knew who it was at once—Layla.

He stepped closer to the window. Leaning against the window frame, which was covered by damask curtains that extended all the way from the high ceiling to the floor, he gazed at her as she approached. He gave a short whistle, and his bird immediately flew to him and landed on his hand.

He moved his hand closer to the window as if to show his canary the woman walking outside. However, the bird seemed uninterested and flew back to its cage. As Layla continued walking, she was soon no longer visible from his bedroom window. But Matthias stayed by the window for a long while.

At some point recently, he had made a habit of starting each day by that window, basking in the sunlight and watching Layla as she headed off for work.

*I wonder if she's all healed by now,* he thought, unwittingly furrowing his brow at the memory of her tiny, bruised body.

He had not spoken to her since that night.

He could have visited her and seen for himself how she was doing, but he didn't want to do that. It was strange. He didn't fully understand where his hesitance was coming from.

He left the window, sat in the easy chair by the fireplace, and

picked up the newspaper that he had been reading earlier. However, he couldn't focus—the words on the page seemed meaningless to him.

That night, Layla had cried. He had seen her cry countless times before, and yet somehow, this time had felt different, as if he were witnessing it for the first time. He couldn't get it out of his thoughts.

*"Wait,"* he had said, stopping her before she could get off the bed. He had held a small bottle of medicine out to her. *"This is a painkiller."*

She had simply looked up at his face with a dazed look in her eyes.

He had removed the bottle's cap and stepped closer to her. Then he had grabbed her chin and made her open her mouth. She had squirmed, but he had still managed to pour some of the medicine down her throat. It was quite bitter, but she had maintained a serene expression as she swallowed it.

He had chuckled, then retrieved his handkerchief and wiped her lips dry. And then he had taken a piece of candy that he had put in the first-aid kit, and placed it in her mouth. She had stared at him for a moment, then after the candy had started to melt in her mouth, tears had started to trickle down from her eyes.

The unexpected tears had caught him off guard. Without making any sound, she had continued to shed thick tears. He had wondered what she was so upset about as he watched her holding the piece of candy in her mouth, neither spitting it out nor swallowing it.

He had then stiffly placed his hand against her face and wiped her tears. But she had just kept crying.

Unsure what to do, he had asked, *"Are you still in pain?"*

She had nodded in response.

Not knowing what to say, he had simply hugged her. Having previously tried to push him away, she had now resignedly let herself be pulled into his embrace.

He had held her for a long time, as she sobbed and chewed the candy. By the time she stopped crying, her hot, sad tears had

soaked the front of his sweater. Whenever he reflected on that memory, the somber emotions he had felt that night swept over him again, just as they were doing right now.

Without reading a single word, he put the newspaper back down and slumped deep into the chair, looking upward. As he stared at the ceiling, he could see her crying face again.

Usually, seeing her cry made him happy.

Previously, he had enjoyed seeing her tear-soaked face so much, he had eagerly made her cry whenever he had the chance. Of course, there had been times that he hadn't enjoyed it so much, such as when someone or something other than himself had been the cause of her tears. At those times, he had disliked the sight and wanted her crying to stop.

It had always been clear-cut like that for him. And not just with her tears—he had felt the same way about everything of Layla's. In fact, he had felt the same way about everything in his life. It all had to be his.

He reflected on his time with Layla that night like a chess master analyzing a game he had lost to see what went wrong.

*They were strange tears,* he thought. Usually, she would cry when she was overcome with anger, shame, or fear. He had no problem enjoying her crying on such occasions.

But that night, she had seemed almost as if she wasn't aware that she was crying. Her eyes had contained no anger or fear, and yet they hadn't been blank, either. They had been full of some feeling he couldn't recognize, even upon reflection.

He had wanted to stop her crying, but not in the angry way he had wanted to stop her when she had been crying over Kyle Ettman.

The feeling inside him was strange and uncomfortable, but he didn't especially mind it. It was almost like the feeling of being mildly intoxicated by a fine liqueur. He felt listless and yet slightly agitated as if he were being chased by something. He felt both confused and happy at the same time.

*Happy. Yes, I feel happy.* He felt happy in a way that was wholly distinct from the pleasure he had previously derived from making Layla cry. He started to wonder if perhaps that was the reason he kept her around instead of casting her away so that he could feel this happiness. So that he could have this happiness for himself.

He thought back to the moment after she had stopped crying when he had gazed at her tired face. She had calmly let him wipe away her tears and sweep her hair aside. But like a faintly sparkling light that finally went out, that strange emotion in her eyes had faded away, leaving only fear and resignation in its place. He had kept gazing at her, wondering if the emotion would return, but it hadn't.

He wanted to recover the happiness he had felt that night. But no matter how many times he ran through the memory, he couldn't feel it. He frowned. It was as if the feeling were sand slipping through his fingers. Just then, there was a polite knock at his door.

"Your Grace, it's Hessen."

"Come in," Matthias replied, lowering his gaze from the ceiling.

Hessen walked over to him and stood next to his chair. "Lady Herhardt inquired about your plans for this evening."

"Mother did?"

"Yes. She had planned to go to tonight's benefit performance at the public hall with Dowager Herhardt, but Lady Herhardt is coming down with a cold, so she will have to stay in. Thus, if you had no other plans for this evening, she would like you to accompany your grandmother in her stead. Will that work for you, Your Grace?"

"A benefit performance?"

"Yes, students from several schools in the Karlsbar area will be performing, including the local village school."

Suddenly, Matthias understood why Layla had been walking to work. Now that he thought about it, she seemed to have been dressed a bit more stylishly than usual, as well.

"Sure," he replied. "I'll go."

# Chapter 62:
## A Night at the Public Hall

“Did you see, Miss Llewellyn? Duke Herhardt is here!” Mrs. Graeber whispered excitedly.

Layla, who had just come out into the lobby after watching the children's dress rehearsal, reacted with surprise. “Did you say the duke? Not just his mother and grandmother?”

“Yes! Duke Herhardt himself! I think he came with his grandmother... Ah! Look over there.”

Layla looked in the direction Mrs. Graeber was pointing, and saw the duke with a crowd of people surrounding him. Just then, he turned his head and made eye contact with her. She gasped, then quickly smiled and nodded before lowering her head. Thankfully, the duke walked away before too long.

Watching him with disappointment as he walked away, Mrs. Graeber asked Layla, “Since you live at Arvis, do you see the duke around the estate now and then?”

Feeling a pang of guilt, Layla clasped her hands together. “Um... yes, occasionally.”

“Wow! I'm jealous. I would be so happy to be able to see him occasionally, even if it were very infrequently and from a great distance.”

Ever since the school field trip to Arvis that autumn, Mrs. Graeber had been showing limitless admiration for the duke. She continued to gush forth to Layla about him—how elegant and kind he was, and thus how great of a nobleman he was. Eventually, she went back into the auditorium to attend to the upper-class children's choir rehearsal, which she was in charge of.

Layla was passing through the lobby to meet with some of the other teachers when she saw Duke Herhardt again. Looking highly dignified, he was talking to a middle-aged gentleman. She stopped walking for a moment and cautiously watched him.

Ever since she was young, she had always felt scared and uncomfortable around the duke. Thus, it had always felt strange to her when others heaped praise on him. She was usually unable to agree with what they said about him, but she had never felt compelled to find out why they liked him so much.

She still felt this way, although she at least no longer thought their compliments of him were mere empty praise. They were right; he was perfectly carrying out his role as Duke Matthias von Herhardt, lord of Arvis. This made his hidden personality, which only she knew, feel like something from a dream, a beautiful but brutal nightmare, to be exact.

She slowly started raising her gaze again from the long shadow she was casting on the lobby's marble floor. It struck her how tall he was. He had a slender frame, but seeing him in front of her, she was almost overcome by how strong he looked.

And his blue eyes... *Wait,* she thought, *his eyes?* She realized that he was looking at her out of the corner of his eye, even as he remained facing the person he was talking to. Wondering why he was looking at her, she looked back at him in a daze. His eyes were showing no particular emotion, but there was a subtle grin on his lips.

“What are you doing here, Miss Llewellyn?”

Layla jumped at the sound of the principal's voice behind her.

“I'm sorry if I startled you. Come now, let's go greet everyone.”

The principal then started walking with the rest of the teachers towards the area where Duke Herhardt was standing with Dowager Herhardt. Somehow, Layla ended up at the front of the pack, near the duke.

Matthias's gaze moved over all the teachers, and ended up on Layla. Before she lowered her eyes, she caught a glimpse of a slight smile in his narrowed eyes. She wondered why he would be smiling, but she didn’t want to look up. Instead, she just stared at his well-polished shoes, wishing that the performance would start soon.

Little did she know the troubles that she was going to face that night.

* * *

“You've been looking quite lively lately, Matthias,” Dowager Herhardt cheerfully said as she gazed at her grandson's face. “Do you have some good news to tell me about?”

“No, not that I can think of,” he replied with a polite smile.

Despite his disappointing response, his grandmother knew that there had to be something behind his uncharacteristically bright mood. She realized with amusement that he was finally acting his age. He was acting like a young man at the height of his vitality instead of acting many years older like he usually did. Sometimes she forgot how young he still was, but it was impossible to miss right now.

“Well, anyway, I'm happy to see you in such a good mood,” she said, deciding not to press him any further on the matter. “Now, you may think of events like this as trivial, but they are one of the most important ways to gain public support and respect.” She looked around the auditorium, then looked at her grandson again. “I think it's wonderful that as head of the household, you're taking the trouble to come tonight. Your grandfather and father were never this considerate.”

The public liked to refer to Matthias as the masterpiece of the House of Herhardt. Although Dowager Herhardt would always giggle and say that this was overpraised, deep down, she believed it more than anyone.

It was almost as if she had lived such a long life, outliving her husband and her son, just so that she could be around for the glorious days when her grandson was the head of the household. This thought had been popping into her mind occasionally.

As she gazed lovingly at her grandson, the auditorium's lights went down. The audience fell silent, and the emcee appeared on the stage.

Matthias sat with perfect posture and clapped politely along with the rest of the audience. However, he had absolutely no interest in what was happening on the stage. The only thing on his mind was the necklace that Layla was wearing.

He hadn't been sure at first when he had seen her from afar, but when she had come closer, it had been clear that it was the emerald necklace he had gotten for her. To him, that necklace was like a sign indicating that she was his. Even if she didn't know it, he did, and that gave him a deep feeling of satisfaction.

His attention was finally drawn to the stage when the children from the village school started performing a play. Seeing many familiar faces, he looked closely and realized that they were the children who had visited Arvis with Layla.

He shifted his gaze to the unlit area in front of the stage. Sure enough, there was Layla, watching her students. The nervous children kept glancing at their teacher throughout the performance. The smallest child among them, whom Matthias recognized as the little girl who had spilled ice cream on Layla's clothes on the day of the field trip, looked ready to cry. He wondered what expression was on Miss Llewellyn's face. From behind, she looked just as nervous as her students.

The play was about fairies living in a forest. The children traversed the stage wearing translucent wings, occasionally eliciting delighted laughter from the audience. But Matthias's eyes remained fixed on the young woman nervously standing in front of the stage. He was thus more startled than others in the audience when one of the children suddenly started crying loudly.

“Oh dear,” Dowager Herhardt muttered.

Following his grandmother's gaze, he saw that it was the little girl.

“Miss Llewellyn!!” she wailed, looking straight at Layla.

Now that the play had been interrupted, a look of panic fell over the other children's faces.

Matthias narrowed his eyes as he looked at Layla. *Will she be able*

*to handle this?*

The principal rushed over to Layla and whispered something in her ear. She reacted with a startled expression and shook her head, then gave in and quickly walked up onto the stage. The entire audience watched as the young teacher comforted the crying child.

“Oh my, it's her,” Dowager Herhardt said, smiling as she recognized the teacher. “It's Bill Remmer's adopted daughter.”

Layla was crouched behind a fake flower bush, consoling the little girl. Eventually, the girl stopped crying, but she didn't seem at all capable of resuming her role in the play. Furthermore, some of the other children appeared to be ready to cry as well if the situation weren't resolved quickly.

Finally, the principal seemed to decide that special measures were called for. He summoned Layla to the edge of the stage and held out a stack of papers to her. Once again, she shook her head vigorously, but the principal was insistent.

Layla went back behind the flower bush and frantically leafed through a few of the pages. Then she cleared her throat and began speaking the flower fairy's lines. “Wow... L-look... at... th-the... pretty... f-flowers... everyone!” she said in a shaky voice.

The whispers among audience members quieted down. However, things didn't seem quite under control. Rather, the audience seemed to have grown silent out of even greater shock than before.

“N-no... n-no... d-don't... pick... the... f-flowers. You'll h-hurt them!”

It took Matthias a few moments to grasp what he was hearing. Layla was awkwardly stammering out the lines in an embarrassed tone of voice. However, as the play resumed, the other children seemed to calm down.

The flower fairy character didn't have many lines, but each time she spoke, there was a murmur among the audience members. As much as they knew it would be inappropriate to laugh, the sight of an adult trying to solemnly deliver the flower fairy's lines, and doing such an awkward job at it, was quite something to behold.

Finally, the audience broke into laughter. Even Dowager Herhardt, who had been trying to maintain a dignified air, couldn't help but laugh.

Matthias glanced at his laughing grandmother, then turned his eyes back to Layla struggling on the stage. She was crouched down, frantically reading the script in preparation for her next line. The little girl, who had stopped crying, was standing next to her, staring into space. Matthias sat obliquely in his seat, leaning on the armrest as he watched Layla.

As if she wanted to thank her teacher for saying her lines for her, the little girl took off the crown of flowers she was wearing and placed it on Layla's head. Layla was too focused on the script to notice.

“Th-this... is... a g-great... p-party! Ha ha ha... I'm... s-so... excited!”

At the sight of the flower fairy awkwardly laughing, Matthias finally burst into laughter as well. Layla's cheeks were now as red as the roses in the crown on her head.

As the play continued, Matthias could tell that the whole audience was eagerly awaiting each of the flower fairy's few lines. He could also tell that of all the performances at the evening's benefit, this play performed by the younger students from the village school would be everyone's favorite.

As soon as the play reached its conclusion, Layla hurried down from the stage again. The audience gave her a standing ovation.

Still chuckling, Matthias gladly joined in on the applause for the pretty fairy who, despite her horrible acting, was clearly the star of the play.

# Chapter 63:
## You Look Pretty

The first half of the benefit concluded with the end of the young students' play that had drawn so much laughter from the audience.

Those of the younger students who had older siblings performing in the second half went and sat with their parents. Most of those that didn't were taken home early so that they could go to bed.

“We're so sorry, Miss Llewellyn. Truly.” Little Monica's parents apologized to Layla repeatedly as they headed out to their carriage.

“Please, there's no need to apologize. It's fine,” she replied.

“Still, because of Monica's shyness, you had to endure that humiliation.” This harsh comment by Monica's grandmother made Layla flinch.

After Monica's family departed, Mrs. Graeber walked up to Layla, smiling. “Would you like to get a cup of coffee?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I need some time alone,” Layla replied.

“Oh, come now. You were cute!”

“That doesn't make me feel any less embarrassed,” Layla playfully replied, smiling.

“You really were, though. And you accomplished something amazing on that stage. Normally the nobles who attend these benefit performances barely crack a smile, but you had them roaring with laughter!”

Mrs. Graeber's attempts at consolation only added to the depth of Layla's despair. *She's right. And he was probably laughing along with the rest of them. Goodness gracious.*

“The principal was quite pleased as well,” Mrs. Graeber added. “He said that we received more donations than usual thanks to you.”

“I really hate him right now.” Layla sighed and then giggled.

After saying goodnight to Mrs. Graeber, Layla walked to the park

behind the public hall. She really did need some alone time. As she watched the steam escape her mouth in the cold night air, she felt like it was her soul was leaving her body.

*I can't believe that really happened.* She sat on a bench in the deserted park and took off the shoes that had been tormenting her feet all day. Then she looked up at the sky and let out a long sigh. *I guess you can't die from humiliation,* she thought. *At least I'm still breathing.* She then let out another sigh, which turned into a moan, and then a scream. Her soul continued to leak out of her mouth.

* * *

Matthias found Layla exactly where he had expected her to be. He knew that since she had been embarrassed beyond belief, she would likely want to be somewhere away from other people. And since he knew she couldn't stand uncomfortable shoes, she would likely be on a bench. However, since she was easily frightened, she would be somewhere with at least one streetlamp nearby. And probably a tree or two.

“Sure enough,” he muttered to himself as he found her sitting in the corner of the park behind the public hall, on a bench under a large tree, next to a streetlamp, with her shoes off, sighing repeatedly as she looked up at the sky.

He approached her with slow, light steps. When his shadow touched the bench, she gasped and looked in his direction. “How did you...?” She looked around, then back at him. Then she placed her feet on top of her discarded shoes to keep him from taking them like he had the other time.

Seeing the look of alarm on her face, he chuckled. “Do you really think that will keep me from taking them?” he joked, looking down at her shoes.

Layla gasped again and quickly put her feet into the shoes. After firmly securing the straps and standing up, she finally looked relieved. Looking at her, he realized that he didn't need to ask if her bruises had healed. Her quick, nimble movements made it clear that

she was feeling better.

"Sit."

"No. I'm fine, Your Grace." She hesitantly stepped backward until she was under the streetlamp.

Her attitude was grating at his nerves, but he had decided he wasn't going to let it get to him anymore. The gaslight softly illuminated her face. It reminded him of how she had looked under the stage lights. He liked it.

"Have you thought about switching from teaching to a career in acting?" he asked. "I've never seen an actor make an audience laugh as much as you did."

*Ah. I see why he came looking for me.* "I know I was a little... awkward up there," she said, looking at her feet.

"A little?" he replied, chuckling.

*Maybe you really can die from humiliation,* she thought, biting her lip. Her fidgety hands started to shake. "Well, I should get g-"

"You look pretty."

These unexpected words hit her like a ton of bricks. She looked up in surprise. He was looking down at her with his head slightly tilted.

*What should I say? "Thank you"? Ugh, that sounds stupid. "Not at all, Your Grace"? Ugh, that's no better.* She racked her brain but couldn't come up with a suitable response. She considered making a run for it without saying anything, but she knew he would catch her easily. Finally, she settled on, "M-my uncle Bill got it for me." *I know he wasn't talking specifically about the necklace, but who cares. Actually, maybe that is what he was talking about. I did get a few compliments on it tonight.*

He narrowed his eyes slightly, then chuckled again. His gaze slowly shifted from her red cheeks to her white neck and the emerald necklace adorning it. She hunched her shoulders, feeling strange having him look at her like that.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"Pardon?"

“The necklace.”

“Oh... yes. Of course, I do,” she confidently replied.

He laughed once again, seemingly amused by her reply. It was an unusually soft, gentle laugh.

*I didn't realize he could laugh like that,* she thought. Taken aback by the strange attitude he was displaying, she stared closely at him.

Once he finished laughing, he stared intently back at her. They continued to gaze at each other for a long while until their silence was broken by a bird perched on a branch of the tree.

She jumped, startled by the sound of the bird flapping its wings and flying up towards the sky. Suddenly she was flooded with fear as it occurred to her that someone could be watching them. She decided that she needed to leave at once, so she started walking, but before she could take a single step, he grabbed her arm. She yelped with fright. Before she knew it, she felt the cold metal of the streetlamp against her back as he pressed her against it.

He stood in front of her, still holding her arm.

“I'm g-going to scream,” she said as tears welled up in her eyes.

He stuck out his chest and calmly replied, “Do as you wish.” He put his hand to her face and gazed intently at her.

She tried to wriggle out of his grip, but his eyes remained steady.

“Where did you hide it?” he asked with a determined look in his eyes.

She gasped. “Hide it...?” Her voice was shaking. “Hide what…?”

He peered at her face for a while longer, then let out a slightly dispirited sigh. He thought he had seen a vague clue for a moment, but it had quickly disappeared. That disappointed him greatly, but the woman in front of him was beautiful enough to rid him of his desire.

He caressed her cheek and chin, then slowly lowered his hand and wrapped it around her long, slender neck. When his fingers brushed against the cold pearls of her necklace, he gulped without even realizing it.

He knew that she bruised easily. Thus, he knew that if he were to

tighten his grip on her throat, it would surely leave a mark. Then he imagined putting his mouth to her skin and licking and sucking on it. That would leave a mark too. He imagined doing this to her whole body, from head to toe. He would be leaving his mark, so everyone would know that she belonged to him.

Even as he imagined doing this to the woman in front of him, he let out another dispirited sigh. After thoroughly caressing her neck, which was stiff with fear, he put his hand against her cheek again. He felt the inside of her lip with his finger. It was moist and warm. *That's probably not the only place that feels like that,* he thought.

Her eyes widened as soon as she felt his finger in her mouth. It brushed across the tender inner surface of her lower lip, then settled on her soft tongue. That was when she bit down on it. However, she didn't bite hard enough to hurt him. Instead, he only felt more stimulated by her defiant attitude. He laughed.

"Try harder, Layla," he whispered, "if you want it to hurt."

*Yep, he's a psycho,* she thought as she stopped biting his finger. She knew that even if she were to bite down on it hard enough for it to hurt, he wouldn't back off.

As she calmed down, he snickered and took his finger out of her mouth. Then he took his finger, glistening with her saliva, and slowly rubbed it against her lips.

*If I kiss you, you'll probably resist again,* he thought. By now, he had learned that whatever resistance she put up was easy for him to get past.

He could effortlessly satisfy his lust if he chose to. However, he couldn't bring himself to kiss her. He just remained staring at her, both his hands against her cheeks.

He thought about her accepting his embrace. Not hitting him or trying to push him away, but hugging him and caressing him with her little hands. He thought about the happiness of that moment.

He lowered his hand and caressed the back of her neck. Feeling lost in the moment and unsure of what to do, he gulped. *Damn it,* he thought, almost vocalizing the curse before he clenched his hands

into fists to stop himself. Then he opened his hand and gently held her cheek again before letting out a quiet sigh and finally releasing her. After he took a step back, she finally snapped out of her daze and breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, instead of running away like he had expected her to, she just stood quietly in place. She lowered her eyes as if lost in thought, then looked at him again and furrowed her brow slightly. She kept looking at him like that for a long time. All the while, he was looking right back at her.

She felt a strange, unfamiliar emotion like she was lost. Just then, something cold and soft landed on her eyelashes. She flinched and looked up. He slowly looked up as well. It was snowing. It was the first snowfall of winter.

* * *

Night had long since fallen by the time the second half of the benefit was over. After helping with the cleanup, Layla hurried across the lobby. She didn't feel like walking all the way home in the snow, so she would have to catch a stagecoach or a bus to get as close to Arvis as possible. Her heart started racing when she realized it was almost time for the stagecoach to depart.

Just as she had made it down the stairs outside the public hall, she heard a familiar voice.

“Layla! I mean, Miss Llewellyn!”

“Mr. Fett!”

Mr. Fett, one of Arvis's coachmen and a friend of Bill's, was waving enthusiastically at her. “Let's go!” he shouted, pointing to a carriage parked on the side of the road. It was one of the Herhardt family's carriages.

The sight of the Herhardt family crest on the side of the carriage made the duke's face flash into her mind. She shook her head. “No, thank you! I'll just find my own way h-”

“Dowager Herhardt insists, Layla.”

She couldn't believe her ears.

“She said that since you're going back to Arvis anyway, you might as well ride along with her. Come on, then! They're waiting for you.”

# Chapter 64:
## A Glance

So much snow had fallen, the carriage couldn't go very fast. Layla wasn't able to hide her uneasiness as she gazed out the window.

A smile appeared on Dowager Herhardt's face as she watched her from across the carriage. “There's nothing to be afraid of, dear.”

“Oh, uh, of course, ma'am. It's just that—”

“Maybe this isn't the most comfortable ride, but there's no need to be nervous. I invited you to ride with us for your own convenience.”

Layla felt somewhat reassured by the dowager's warmth towards her.

“It's the first snow of the season, and yet so much is falling,” Dowager Herhardt said. “It's probably going to snow a lot this winter. Don't you think so, Matthias?” she asked, turning towards her grandson.

Without thinking, Layla followed the dowager's gaze and ended up making eye contact with the duke. She looked away immediately, but it still made her heart start racing again.

“Yes, Grandmother,” Matthias replied, smiling politely.

Katharina von Herhardt ably led the conversation with Layla, asking her about the school where she taught and praising the benefit performance from which they were returning. Her smile widened as she brought up the play Layla's class had performed. “You seemed quite embarrassed up there, but I think you did a wonderful job.”

Layla blushed at the dowager's attempt to console her. “Thank you, ma'am.” Soon her cheeks were as red as a ripe apple.

Matthias struggled to hold back his laughter as he was reminded of Layla's awkward acting. He gazed at her. Her fidgeting hands were clasped together on her lap. *She doesn't know how to hide her emotions,* he thought. *And she's bad at lying. That's why she did such a*

*dreadful job of acting.*

He leaned back in his seat and stretched out his legs long enough for one of his shoes to touch Layla's. She immediately pulled her foot back, but he didn't give up.

The carriage started to rattle as they turned onto a road in even worse condition. Layla stared at the floor, feeling like she wanted to cry. She had pulled her foot away several times now, but Matthias continued to stretch out his legs and touch his shoe against hers. It was only the slightest of contact, but she felt as embarrassed as if she were sitting there naked.

After a pause, Dowager Herhardt started up the conversation again. “For such a young lady, you' re quite good with children.”

Layla looked up with a start. Realizing that she was going to draw the dowager's attention if she kept pulling her foot away from Matthias's, she resolved to stop thinking about it.

“Do you like children?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“You're smart and you like children. You must be an excellent teacher. Don't you agree, Matthias?” she shifted her gaze from Layla to Matthias again.

He glanced briefly at Layla, then nodded, smiling. “Yes, Grandmother.”

Layla's eyes widened at the friendliness in his voice. Even if his response was mere politeness, his attitude surprised her. She would have expected him to give no more than a slight nod. That was the Duke Herhardt she had come to know.

“Winter break is coming up soon, Miss Llewellyn,” he said, looking into her eyes.

“Yes, it is, Your Grace,” she replied, reluctantly resuming eye contact with him. *Stay calm,* she told herself. *Don't act strange. You're just a family member of one of their staff. That's it.*

“How are you planning to spend the break?” he casually asked.

“Pardon? Oh, well...” It was a completely ordinary question, but her mind went blank, and she struggled to come up with a

response.

He smiled subtly with amusement at this.

“I'm going to... study, and help Uncle Bill with his work, and...”

While she was hesitating, he tapped his shoe against hers. She barely stopped herself from crying out in surprise before finishing her sentence. “And p-prepare for next semester!”

Because she was so flustered, her words came out much louder than she had intended, almost as if she were making a solemn proclamation.

Dowager Herhardt laughed with delight. “Well, Layla, it sounds like you're going to have quite a productive winter break. Bill did a great job raising you.”

“I'm flattered that you think so, ma'am,” Layla replied in a meek voice, wishing that she could crawl into a hole and hide.

Matthias nonchalantly crossed his legs. The bold look he was giving her made her feel even more embarrassed.

“You're an excellent teacher indeed, Miss Llewellyn,” he said. His tone was very polite, even though it was clear that he was teasing her.

Suppressing the urge to stomp down on his foot with the sharp heel of her shoe, Layla responded to him with the same courteous tone she had used towards his grandmother. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

She had resolved not to look at him anymore, but this was a challenging task while confined inside a carriage.

When he eventually managed to make eye contact with her again, she flinched and hunched her shoulders. In contrast to his earlier mischievousness, there was now a calm, emotionless look in his eyes. Just like there had been the day she had almost drowned in the river.

* * *

It took twice as long as normal to reach the road leading to Arvis. Dowager Herhardt had started to doze off, and it was silent inside

the carriage. Outside, the rhythmic sound of the horses' hooves and the rattling of the carriage marked the passage of time.

After looking out the window for a while, Matthias shifted his gaze to Layla. She had started to doze off as well. Despite her best efforts to stay alert, she could barely keep her eyes open. Every now and then, her head would start to fall forward. When it did, she would flinch and look around.

Matthias lowered his gaze from her face to her neck. The emerald necklace he had gotten for her glimmered in the dark carriage. He lowered his gaze more until he was looking at the carriage floor. Viewed next to his shoes, her tiny shoes looked like a doll's shoes. He was suddenly struck with wonder at the thought that those little feet were capable of carrying someone who was always running around so busily. Just then, the carriage screeched to a halt.

“Hey, Bill!” shouted the coachman. “What are you doing all the way out here?”

Layla's eyes shot open. She was still sleepy, but she rushed to look out the window.

“I was worried about Layla because of the snow,” Bill replied.

“Layla's riding in this carriage. Dowager Herhardt was very concerned about her.”

“Layla's in there?”

Dowager Herhardt was roused from her sleep by the sound of the two men talking outside.

Layla looked at her and smiled. “Um, pardon me, ma'am, but may I...”

Before Layla could finish her sentence, Dowager Herhardt nodded and said, “Yes, Layla. You can go to Bill.”

* * *

“What a stroke of luck it was for that girl to meet Bill Remmer,” Dowager Herhardt said.

“Yes, Grandmother.” Matthias looked at the empty seat across from him.

Layla had spared no time in exiting the carriage to go to Bill. Matthias watched helplessly through the window as she ran into the gardener's arms. He had the unpleasant feeling that possession of his was being carried off by someone else.

“Who knew that he was such a softie?” Dowager Herhardt continued. “He treats her with more affection than most fathers treat their biological children. I think it will be best for her if she stays at Arvis, if only for Bill's sake. I have no idea why she's thinking of transferring.”

This casual comment gave Matthias a start. “Did you say she's thinking of... transferring?”

“That's right. She wants to go to a different city. It's beyond me why young ladies are always so eager to leave their hometown. Once you get on in years, you learn that your hometown is best,” she said, clicking her tongue. “I was speaking with the principal tonight. He said that her students are very well-behaved, and their parents love her, so he would very much like to keep her on as a teacher, but for some reason, she wants to transfer to a different school. I understand that she might have wanted to leave after her engagement to Kyle Ettman was broken off, but why would she want to leave Bill when they're so close?”

“I see...”

“The principal told her to consider her decision carefully and let him know early next year, so I guess it's not final yet. Personally, I hope she stays with Bill,” she said in a plaintive tone. “The principal also mentioned that he has a distant relative who owns the big general store downtown. Apparently, the man has a son who would be a great match for Layla. Young people's engagements often get broken off. She may not come from the best background, but she's pretty and smart. I think she'd make a great merchant's wife. It seems like the principal is going to try to set them up. Who knows —if she finds a new potential husband, maybe she'll want to stick around.”

“Sure.”

“If it turns out that Bill doesn't like the merchant's son, I could always give it a try. I'll have to ask Hessen if he can find a well-bred young man who doesn't live too far from Arvis. Think of how wonderful it would be for that poor girl if she can get married and start a family while still teaching at the village school and still living near her uncle Bill. Won't that be grand, Matthias?”

Just then, the carriage came to a stop in front of the mansion.

Rather than responding to his grandmother's question, Matthias opened the door and got out. The coachman jumped back, having been about to open the door from the outside.

Matthias slowly fixed his coat's lapel and turned around. “Let me help you down, Grandmother,” he said, showing his usual elegance as he extended his hand.

Dowager Herhardt placed her hand in his and descended from the carriage. They entered the mansion, and the sound of their footsteps on the marble floor echoed through the main hall.

* * *

After the carriage set off ahead of them and went through Arvis's gate, Bill and Layla walked hand-in-hand through the snow back to the cottage.

“I thought you at least wouldn't laugh!” she shouted when he burst into laughter after hearing her recount the fiasco that her class's play had turned into.

Unfortunately, her complaint only made him laugh even louder.

“It's okay, Layla. I bet you looked cute up there on stage.”

“I doubt the audience felt that way,” she grumbled, giggling. Just hearing Bill say it was okay made her feel like everything was all right.

They continued to chat as they trudged through the snow, and eventually, they reached the path leading around the rose garden. He happened to glance down at her shoes, then he gave them a second, concerned look. He stopped walking and cleared his throat. “Want a piggyback ride?”

“What? No!” She giggled at the ridiculous suggestion. “I'm not some little kid! I can walk just fine.”

“You look uncomfortable. You're limping!” He crouched down with his broad back facing her.

“Uncle Bill!”

“Either you get on my back, or I sling you over my shoulder—your choice.”

“I think I'm too heavy for you...”

“What do you take me for? I may be getting on in years, but I'm still strong enough to carry five girls your size on my back at once!”

Realizing that he was never going to give in, she reluctantly climbed on his back. Her concern disappeared as he immediately bolted upright and started dashing down the snowy forest path. She laughed merrily, all her anxiety melting away.

With each chuckle, some white steam escaped her lips, blending with the white snowflakes fluttering down all around. She could feel Bill's bulky frame shake as he laughed along with her.

The thick snowflakes filled in the footprints he was leaving on the path.

# Chapter 65:
## A Suitable Husband

Layla gave a slightly awkward smile to the young man she was with. “Thanks for walking me this far. I'll walk the rest of the way home by myself.”

He smiled amiably back at her and pointed down the road. “Look, we're almost there. I'll walk you all the way to your home.”

“No, really. I'll... just go by myself. My uncle's very strict, you see.” She looked around as she spoke, nervous that someone would see them together. She knew that no good could come from an Arvis resident seeing her with a man. Even though there was nothing between them, rumors spread quickly at Arvis.

“Ah, I see.” He let out a dejected sigh. “Then I'll be on my way. If you have time this Sunday, though, perhaps we could have lunch together?”

“No, I-”

“Or if you're busy this week, next week would work for me too! Unless you're completely repulsed by the thought of seeing my face again, I'd love to see you one more time,” he said, mustering all his confidence even while his cheeks were reddening. “It would be a shame for our relationship to end after only having one cup of tea together. I'd like to see you again and get to know you better. After that, if you still feel how you do now, I won't press you any further.” From the look on his face, it was clear that he wasn't going to leave until he got a definite answer from her.

He was the son of the owner of the general store in downtown Karlsbar, and he came to the school occasionally to deliver supplies. She had seen him a handful of times in the halls of the school, but that was it. Thus, she was quite surprised earlier that afternoon when she had been called into the principal's office, only to find the young man waiting for her there. The principal had said that the young man was a distant relative of his and that he wanted to set

them up on a date for the purposes of considering marriage. Her mind had gone blank from the unexpected offer.

Hesitating to reply to his request for a second date, she nervously looked around again. Just then, she heard the sound of a car approaching from behind them. Her heart sank. She wanted to believe she was imagining it, but the sound continued to grow louder.

Soon, the dusky road was illuminated by the car's headlights. The car slowed down slightly as it passed them, then sped up again. It was Duke Herhardt's car.

“Miss Llewellyn?”

The sound of the young man's voice snapped her out of her daze. “I'm sorry,” she said, lowering her head. “I... don't think I'm ready for that kind of relationship yet. I'm really sorry.”

She had agreed to have tea with the young man at the principal's urging, but she had absolutely no intention of looking for a potential husband at the moment. Perhaps she would get married someday, but for the time being, she just wanted to work hard and live an ordinary life.

“Oh... I see.” He couldn't hide his disappointment at her firm rejection, but he understood how she felt and respected it. He told her that he was the one who should be apologizing, not her. He hoped that he hadn't made her too uncomfortable by pressing her for a second date. After telling her this, he walked off with a sullen look on his face.

She felt bad for hurting him when he was clearly a good person, but she knew she had made the right choice. If she had failed to reject him early on, it could only led to him getting hurt more deeply later on, just like what had happened with Kyle.

She winced at the sudden thought of Kyle. She often wondered how he was doing, and she also realized that all she could do for him was pray that he was doing well. No matter how much she missed him, there was no going back to their days together, when they used to walk down this very road together, laughing and

chatting.

After the young man left, she remained standing in the same spot until the road was completely dark. This was because, as soon as she stopped thinking about how much she missed the good old days with Kyle, her mind was flooded with uneasiness. She worried that if she walked any farther down the road, she might run into the duke. She was suddenly reminded of that strange, first autumn that the duke had stayed at Arvis.

She took a slow, deep breath of the cold winter air, and tried to picture the coming spring when she would be starting a new chapter in a new place.

She hoped to find a place to stay that had a huge window. If her room got a lot of sunlight, maybe she wouldn't be too sad. Ideally, there would be a tree outside the window that she could look at, or if not, at least a nearby park or forest she could visit when she missed the smell of Arvis's lush vegetation.

Eventually, these thoughts about the happy days to come calmed her anxious heart. Feeling a little braver, she cautiously walked her bicycle down the road. After turning a corner, she was happy to see that Platanus Road was filled with nothing but the white moonlight and the black shadows of the trees lining it.

She breathed a sigh of relief, then nimbly jumped up onto the seat of her bicycle. The sound of her energetic pedaling filled the silence of the night.

* * *

Kyle opened his mailbox with the same nervous anticipation as always. He was excited to see a couple of envelopes inside, but this excitement gave way to disappointment when he saw who they were from. He had been sending a letter to Layla every week, but so far, she had not sent him a single response.

He let out a quiet sigh, then slumped back up the dormitory's steps. His room was on the east end of the third floor. With winter break fast approaching, the dormitory was full of students busily

packing in preparation for returning home, but Kyle's room was as quiet as ever.

He entered the dark room and tossed the envelopes down on the table by the door. There was an invitation to a social club and a letter from his parents. He left them unopened and threw himself down onto his bed. A sliver of moonlight passed through a gap in the curtains and fell obliquely across his body.

*"Have you considered going on a trip during your first break?"* his father had gently suggested to him on a phone call a few days earlier.

Many of the wealthier students in the capital traveled all over the continent to broaden their horizons during breaks. Of course, Dr. Ettman had another reason for suggesting this.

Kyle had replied that he would think about it. Even though he knew it was pointless to fantasize about going back to Karlsbar and seeing Layla again, it felt just as pointless to go on a trip. He felt more inclined to stay holed up in his room studying, just as he had done all semester long.

He closed his eyes and immediately recalled Layla smiling sadly and saying, *"There is no place in this world where we can be happy together, just the two of us."* He also recalled himself at that moment, feeling hopeless and unable to say anything in response.

As always, recalling this moment filled him with self-loathing. He hated himself for being so weak, for being nothing without his parents, and especially for having failed to protect the one he loved.

*Once I become a doctor,* he thought, *maybe I can find a place for us to be happy together. But that day is still so far in the future. How will I endure all those years without you? Even just these last few months apart have felt like an eternity.*

He lowered the arm with which he had been covering his eyes and looked at the ceiling. Suddenly it occurred to him that, now that he was legally an adult, he was free to use the money his grandfather had left him as he pleased. He wondered why he hadn't thought of this before. He sat up and swept back his disheveled

hair.

After staring into space for a moment, he got up and went to his desk. Opening a drawer, he hurriedly retrieved a pen and a piece of stationery.

* * *

“Why is everyone suddenly trying to find you a husband?” Bill asked as Layla was putting dinner on the table. She had just finished telling him about the date the principal had pressured her into going on with the general store owner's son.

“Wait... What do you mean, 'everyone'?” she asked.

“I heard that the duke's grandma randomly asked Hessen if he knew of any eligible bachelors that she could set you up with. Chef Mona told me about it.”

“Why would Dowager Herhardt make such a request?”

“Got me. I guess she's taken a liking to you.” A look of pride appeared on his face as he said this.

“I doubt that,” she replied, giggling. She took a loaf of fresh-baked bread out of the oven, placed it on the table, and sat down across from him.

“If that's not it, then I have no idea why she would be interested in finding a husband for you. Hmm... What do you think, Layla?”

“You're not sick of being around me, are you, Uncle Bill?”

“What are you talking about? How could I be sick of you?”

“Well, in that case, I'd like to keep living with you for a long, long time.”

“Are you saying that if the dowager tried to set you up with someone, you'd turn him down?”

“Maybe I'd agree to meet him if he were as nice as you, Uncle Bill. Sadly, though, I don't think such a man exists in the whole wide world,” she said, giggling.

This made him feel bad for her. He suspected that the real reason she wasn't interested in meeting new men was Kyle. In fact, he didn't just suspect this; he was certain of it.

Kyle's letters had continued to arrive every week. Bill's feeling of guilt had increased with each letter he had hidden from Layla. He hated that he was preventing them from communicating when they had such a warm relationship, but he knew that there was no future for the two of them together.

He impulsively started to speak. “By the way, Layla...” He trailed off and started to think. *If Layla still has feelings for Kyle, then maybe I should try to help her marry him, even though she's estranged from his family. It would cause quite a commotion, but she and Kyle could move to the capital and have a nice life there. If that happened, it might be hard for me to keep working as a gardener here at Arvis, but I wouldn't mind that if it was for the sake of Layla's happiness. And who knows—mean Mrs. Ettman might have a change of heart once they make a grandchild for her to hold in her arms.*

“Uncle Bill...?” Layla said after Bill had remained silent for a while.

“Oh, uh... um... chicken! Yes, chicken.”

“Chicken...?”

“Sh-should we catch a chicken tomorrow? Yes. That's what I was going to ask you. Gosh, I must be getting old. Sometimes I trail off and forget what I was going to say,” he awkwardly said. He decided that it would be better to think the matter over before talking to her about it.

Luckily, she didn't seem to suspect anything. Giggling, she replied, “Sure, Uncle Bill. Let's have roast chicken tomorrow!”

* * *

Matthias turned up the volume on the phonograph and turned around. All the lights were out in his room; the only illumination was the glow coming from the fireplace.

He sat on the warm easy chair next to the fireplace and looked across the room at his bird, which was perched on the armrest of the sofa. As soon as he did, it flew to him. He started whistling the melody of the waltz that was playing on the phonograph, and the

canary started singing as if in response.

It was a smart bird. Without any training, one day, it started singing along with the music Matthias was listening to. After this, he had made a regular practice of listening to music with the bird. They mainly listened to waltzes. Occasionally he would put on a symphony or a piano piece, but his bird seemed to sing most beautifully when a waltz was playing.

The waltz came to an end, and the room was once again full of the sound of the fire crackling.

Matthias praised the bird's singing by petting its little head with the tip of his finger. The bird was used to his touch, and it started lovingly rubbing its beak against his hand.

He chuckled, then walked with the bird perched on his finger over to its cage. When he lowered his hand, the bird readily hopped in the cage and settled into its nest.

Matthias closed and latched the door of the golden cage, then pulled the needle off the record, which had started playing the next piece. As he lay down in his bed and looked at the ceiling, a long, tired yawn escaped his mouth. Turning to the bird, he said, “Sleep well.”

As if it understood what he had said, the canary went to sleep in its cozy nest.

As he gazed at the bird, he was no longer smiling.

# Chapter 66:
## Ruined Heaven

Another envelope arrived. This one was quite thick.

“What are you going to do about this, Mr. Remmer?” the mailman whispered. He had been Bill's accomplice in intercepting Kyle's letters since the autumn. It was weighing on his heart just as heavily as it was on Bill's. “You can't go on hiding the letters forever.”

“I know,” Bill replied, sighing. “I'm going to tell Layla, so don't you say a word until-”

“Of course. I understand. My lips are sealed.”

“I'm sorry to have dragged you into this mess.”

“I know you're doing it for Layla's sake, Mr. Remmer. I don't envy the position you're in.” He gave Bill a sympathetic smile.

As the person who first brought the little girl named Layla Llewellyn to Arvis, the mailman knew better than anyone how much Bill's life had changed since her arrival. He also knew that this change was the result of Bill's love for the girl, and it had resulted in him becoming a much happier person than he had been before.

After the mailman left, Bill took the letter into the cottage. Layla was at work, so the cottage was empty.

Bill opened the drawer where he had been storing the letters from Kyle and was about to put the new one in, but then he impulsively changed his mind and pulled out the whole stack of letters. He knew that Layla would be disappointed and upset with him when he told her. He wasn't looking forward to that, but he couldn't stand to keep up this ruse any longer. He tied the letters together with a piece of twine and put them on the dining table.

He planned to tell her that evening. He figured that if the letters were already on the table, it would prevent him from changing his mind about telling her. Having made this decision, he already felt

like a weight had been lifted. He knew it was right to let Layla make up her own mind about how to deal with the situation, and he intended to support her choice, whatever it was.

Thinking forward to the evening's dinner, he looked in the chicken coop and chose the one he wanted to eat—a nice, plump one. Then he set off towards the mansion's greenhouse. After tending to the flowerbeds, he was about to enter the storage area next to the greenhouse where he stored firewood when he heard a familiar voice shouting at him.

“Hey, Bill!” It was the Herhardts' bird-keeper, a friend and coworker that Bill had known for many years. Hurrying towards Bill, he cheerfully said, “The butler requested that you please stop stacking up firewood next to the generator in the storage area.”

Bill frowned. “I guess that new-fangled monster takes precedence over me now, huh?”

A generator had been recently installed in the storage area to provide the mansion with a strange new substance called “electricity.” Bill had been informed that the generator made electricity, but he barely even understood what electricity was or what the point of it was. To him, the generator was nothing but a big, annoying contraption that made an awful noise.

“Fine,” he grumbled, “tell him not to worry, I'll take care of it.” He walked into the storage area, and immediately his eardrums were assaulted by the loud din of the generator. “You stupid thing!” he said, glaring at the machine like it was his enemy. “That noise you make is still just as irritating as the first day I heard it.”

Bill's disdain for all the flashy new products of the modern age was yet another thing he had in common with Dowager Herhardt.

Thinking bitterly of how quiet the storage area had used to be before electricity, he started stacking up the firewood even closer to the giant device. He figured that if he constructed a thick enough wall, it would block some of the noise and make it easier for him to do his work.

“That darn thing seems even louder today than usual,” he

muttered, shaking his head.

He thought of something he had heard Dowager Herhardt say many times: *"Things used to be so much nicer."* He agreed with this sentiment today more than ever.

* * *

The children's attitudes about the upcoming winter break were sharply divided. Some were practically leaping for joy, while others were sad and depressed.

Among those in the second group, Monica was the saddest of all. She left tearstains on Layla's skirt before finally leaving. Layla waved to the little girl as she slowly walked off with her parents, looking over her shoulder repeatedly and sniffling. It pained Layla's heart to think of how sad Monica would surely be when she found out her teacher was leaving for a different school.

*I'd better find a time to bid all the kids farewell before I transfer schools,* she resolved as she diligently packed up her things.

To have enough time to roast a chicken, she would need to start dinner preparations earlier than normal. On her way home, she needed to buy some thick winter socks and a sweater for Bill, and she also planned to get a nice bottle of wine for them to share. She hoped this would soften the blow when she told him that she was going to be working in a different city from the next semester onward. She decided to get a bottle of liquor as well, just for good measure.

As she took off her indoor shoes and put on her outdoor ones, she snickered, remembering a silly comment the duke had made the night of the benefit performance: *"Do you really think that will keep me from taking them?"*

She had been quite surprised by the comment. She hadn't realized that he was capable of that sort of playful banter.

Lately, he hadn't been tormenting her like in the past. She wondered if it was because everything had quieted down for winter. At first, she had been suspicious, worrying that he was plotting

something, but gradually she had relaxed. She wondered why his behavior had shifted, but she didn't feel like pondering over it. He had probably just lost interest in her. She certainly hoped that this was the case.

After buttoning up her winter coat, she headed out of the school into the cold. She put the box of her things in her bicycle's basket and started riding towards the city, going faster than usual. Since her basket was full, the things she bought had to be tied to the bicycle's back seat.

“Tell Mr. Remmer I said hello,” said the grocery store owner as he helped her tie down the load.

“I'll do that. See you later!”

“Be careful now, Layla! Think of how sad Mr. Remmer would be if you fell and broke those bottles!”

She laughed merrily at his playful warning.

The wind was very cold, but the sunshine was clear and warm. She rode speedily through the golden-hued light of the late afternoon. *What a nice day,* she thought. However, as soon as she reached Arvis, she could tell that something was off.

Suddenly, a firefighting carriage sped past her towards the mansion. “Layla! Layla!” Chef Mona shouted as she frantically ran up to her, grasping her hands when she reached her.

“What's going on, Chef Mona? What's with the commotion...?” She looked around and saw that there was smoke rising from the area where the greenhouse was located. “Oh no, is there a fire?”

“It's worse than that!” Mona replied. “The generator exploded and destroyed half the greenhouse, and they're saying it's Bill's fault!”

“What? What did Uncle Bill do?”

“They said that the generator exploded because of something that Bill did, but I didn't catch any more details than that. Dowager Herhardt got injured when the greenhouse started to cave in, so the whole mansion is in an uproar. It looks like they've got the fire under control, and right now, the police are talking to-”

“Uncle Bill!” Layla shouted, seeing Bill being led by two police officers to their car. She started running towards them at once.

Bill's face looked blank until he heard Layla's voice, at which point he looked at her with a helpless expression.

“What's going on, Uncle Bill? Is it true that you caused the accident? It's not, right? It's all a misunderstanding, right?”

“It's all right, Layla. It's all right. It's no big deal,” he replied, forcing a smile even as his face was going pale.

“Please step aside,” one of the officers said to Layla.

When Layla didn't move, a menacing look swept over the officer's face. Chef Mona hurried over and pulled Layla aside.

“Uncle Bill!” Layla shouted as she watched Bill being practically crammed into the police car.

Bill urgently gestured for her to step back while he continued to wear a forced smile. “Go and wait for me at home! I'll be there soon, don't worry. Got it? Oh, and Layla...”

He seemed like he had something more to say, but the officers were out of patience. They shoved him into the back seat and slammed the door shut, then departed from Arvis, leaving Layla behind, crying.

She staggered a few steps forward, then dropped down and sat on the ground. Several Arvis staff members rushed to her side. As they helped her stand up again, something in the distance caught her eye. It was Duke Herhardt, standing on the steps in front of the mansion's front entrance. It seemed like he was looking at her, but she couldn't be sure because, in an instant, thick tears had already blurred her vision.

Long after the commotion had died down, the sound of her crying rang out through the winter evening.

* * *

Layla stepped out of the police station with a glum look on her face. After she had barely managed to pull herself together enough to go to the police station where Bill had been detained, they had

told her there was nothing that could be done.

The generator had exploded and destroyed the storage area because of overheating caused by firewood stacked up next to it. The wall of the greenhouse next to the storage area had then shattered, injuring Dowager Herhardt, who had been looking at one of the flowerbeds near that very wall. The maid attending to Dowager Herhardt had reacted quickly as soon as she heard the explosion, wrapping her body around her to protect her from the flying shards of glass. As a result, the dowager hadn't suffered any severe cuts, but she had broken a bone in the resulting fall. The beautiful greenhouse that everyone had called Arvis's heaven was ruined beyond repair, as were all the rare and precious plants on the side that collapsed.

The police understood that Bill hadn't meant to do it, but since the accident had already happened, he was legally at fault, especially considering that Dowager Herhardt had been injured.

The officer she spoke with had clearly pitied her and had even let her visit with Bill briefly. Layla had been so distraught that she had gotten down on her knees and begged the officer to do whatever he could. However, he had told her that unless the Herhardt family dropped the charges, the police had no choice but to prosecute Bill to the full extent of the law.

*"If Bill gets convicted, will he really have to go to prison?"* she had asked.

*"That's not clear at this point. The civil case will probably take a long time to resolve in court, though, and will be quite expensive. If he's not able to pay the indemnification, then I'm afraid..."* the officer had said, trailing off.

Layla could tell from his sheepish posture that whatever the end of his sentence was going to be, it wouldn't have been good.

She walked all the way back to Arvis, barely aware of her surroundings as she went. The only thing she could do for Bill at this point was to beg the Herhardt family to drop the charges. She wondered if they would even agree. Dowager Herhardt was injured,

and Lady Herhardt's beloved greenhouse was gone. If she barged in on them to beg and plead, it might just make things worse.

As she stared at the mansion in the distance, suddenly, a glimmer of hope appeared in her eyes. *What about Duke Herhardt?!* As she looked at the mansion, the face of the lord of Arvis flashed into her mind, along with the new, milder behavior he had been displaying since the fall, which was so unlike the annoying, scary way he had acted towards her previously.

*Yes, maybe the duke will be willing to help,* she thought, holding her hands together as if in prayer.

She started walking straight across the dormant rose garden with broad steps. She steadily increased her speed as she walked down the forest path. By the time she made it to the riverside, she was breathing quite heavily. Through the steam rising from her mouth with each breath, she could see the duke's cabin. Its lights were on. Now at a full running pace, she headed straight towards the cabin.

# Chapter 67:
## The Lord of Arvis

“I really feel sorry for Bill Remmer,” Dowager Katharina von Herhardt pensively said.

Elise von Herhardt scoffed. “What are you talking about? Thanks to that gardener, the greenhouse is ruined, and you're injured!”

“My injuries aren't very severe,” Katharina replied.

“Goodness. Not very severe?! I truly don't understand why you're so forgiving of Bill.”

Normally Elise respected Katharina's opinions even when she disagreed, but this time she was expressing her disagreement quite harshly.

“Hessen gave him a firm warning about the generator and he ignored it. How can you claim his actions weren't intentional?”

“Come now, we've known Bill for a long time. He would never do such a thing on purpose.”

“What about all my birds that died? Or your precious flowers?” Elise was getting quite worked up. “And that's not all. With the generator out of order, we've lost our electricity. All our end-of-the-year plans are ruined!”

The reception hall and dining room were furnished with electric lights. Without electricity, they wouldn't be able to use them for their New Year's Eve party.

“I told you we should never have installed those newfangled electric lights,” Katharina said. She had shown a skeptical attitude about electricity from the start, and she didn't seem the slightest bit unhappy with the loss of their generator. “Of course, I'm upset about the damage to the greenhouse. But punishing the gardener won't bring it back. He could never afford to pay for the repairs.”

“Maybe not, but punishing him would at least serve as a warning to the other staff members.”

“Are you talking about sending him to prison?”

“Yes, I think the punishment should fit the crime.”

“Elise, Bill Remmer has been working here at Arvis since before Matthias was born. And if he goes to prison, what will become of Layla? He's the only person in the world she can depend on.”

“We have no obligation to worry about our gardener's adopted daughter. Besides, she's an adult now. She can't live rent-free at Arvis forever.” It would have been natural to look the other way with regard to what Bill had done, but Elise's attitude remained firm. “I feel so bad for Claudine, as well. You know how much she loved the greenhouse.”

“Well, that's true,” Katharina conceded.

“She wanted to hold the wedding ceremony there. Think of how disappointed she will be! There's no way that the repairs will be complete in time for the wedding.”

The mention of Claudine gave Katharina pause. She couldn't help but feel sorry for the future duchess. Her favorite spot in all of Arvis had been ruined.

“If we set the precedent of letting a staff member get away with such recklessness, it will spell disorder for Arvis,” Elise emphatically said.

“I understand your point... but I'm just not sure.” Katharina let out a sigh and lay back in her bed. A maid rushed over to arrange the sheets and pillows so that she could lie more comfortably. “I think the best thing to do is to go along with whatever decision Matthias makes.”

Elise narrowed her eyes at this compromise.

“Matthias is the lord of Arvis, after all,” Katharina added.

Elise remained silent for a while, then nodded and said, “Well, that is true. He should be the one to decide. Let's hope that boy makes a wise decision.”

* * *

When Layla entered the riverside cabin's drawing room, Matthias was in the middle of a phone call. He didn't notice she had entered

until his assistant, Mark Evers, alerted him, at which point he slowly turned around.

When he saw that it was her, he gave Mark a look indicating that he could leave. He then continued his phone conversation. Layla grew more anxious as she overheard what he was talking about. He seemed to be talking to someone about having the generator repaired.

Finally, the conversation concluded and he hung up the receiver. “Things have gotten quite busy all of a sudden,” he said, turning towards Layla, “thanks to Mr. Remmer.” His tone sounded neither angry nor sympathetic. He sat down on the sofa and pointed to the chair across from him. “Sit.”

Layla shook her head and gulped.

Rather than repeating his request, Matthias simply crossed his legs.

Hoping that he would at least be willing to hear her apology, she nervously walked to his side and bowed deeply. “I'm sorry. I'm truly, truly sorry, Your Grace.”

He stared at her with an uncomprehending look on his face. “Why are you apologizing?”

“Please... Please forgive my uncle Bill. I'm begging you on his behalf.” She bowed her head repeatedly. “You know my uncle, Your Grace. He would absolutely never do a thing like that on purpose. He doesn't understand what electricity is or what a generator is... He didn't know how dangerous they could be. S-sometimes, he would complain to me about how noisy the generator was. He said it gave him a headache when he was w-working in the storage area. So... I'm sure that's the reason he stacked up that wood. Just to block the noise. He would never intentionally do anything to hurt Dowager Herhardt, or the g-greenhouse.”

She had been rehearsing these points to herself as she rushed over to the cabin. The surging emotions inside of her caused her to stammer a bit, but Matthias listened patiently.

She clasped her trembling hands together. “I know my saying all

this won't erase his mistake, but please... please forgive my uncle Bill."

"Layla," he said in a quiet, gentle voice.

She raised her tear-filled eyes and looked at him.

"So basically, you're asking me to drop the charges?" he asked, getting straight to the point.

She nodded immediately.

"Hmm, drop the charges..." he muttered, slowly lowering his gaze until he was looking at her shoes.

She had gone all the way to the police station and back before taking the forest path to the cabin, so the worn-out, brown shoes were covered in mud.

He slowly began to lift his gaze again, moving from her shoes to the black stockings covering her slender legs, then to the hem of the dark-gray skirt just above her knees. *I bought her pretty clothing, so why is she always dressing like a nun?* he wondered, cocking his head.

He continued to lift his gaze, looking at her partly buttoned checkered coat, the red sweater underneath it, and the wide collar of the blouse underneath that before finally settling on her eyes, which were giving him a pleading look.

"Why should I?" he asked, keeping his eyes fixed on hers.

She just stared back at him as if she didn't understand what she had just heard.

"Why should I drop Bill's charges?" He uncrossed his legs and slowly stood up. The glow from the fireplace glimmered on his slightly furrowed brow.

"Y-your Grace..."

"The generator exploded. My grandmother could have died. The greenhouse was destroyed."

With each item he listed, he took a step towards her until there was only one step's length between them.

"All this serious damage was because of Bill Remmer, and you want me to drop the charges against him? Why?"

"Please, Your Grace."

“You think I should show him mercy just because you're begging me?”

He began to slowly caress the wide collar of her blouse with his long index finger.

The blouse looked very familiar to him. After a moment, he realized that she had been wearing it on the day she had brought her class on the autumn field trip to Arvis.

Then he remembered she had also been wearing it—and had taken it off—the night he had treated her wounds. He also recalled that she had been wearing it the night that he had passed her in his car when she was standing on the side of the road next to the son of the general store owner. For all he knew, she had also been wearing it the day she had made her decision to leave Arvis and applied for a transfer of schools.

“Who do you think you are?” he asked. His tone was neither cold nor forceful, and yet this made it all the more threatening.

She looked back at him with a surprised, hurt expression, as if she had just been slapped in the face. He moved his finger from the lace on her collar to the tip of her chin. He was easily able to lift her face with the strength of a single finger. “Tell me, Layla.”

The tears sitting in her eyes started to flow down, wetting his finger.

“Tell me, just who do you think you are?”

His tone was very dry and aloof.

*Did I dream his change in attitude last autumn?* she wondered, staring at his face. Her tears continued to flow, but she kept her eyes fixed on him. She thought back to all the nice things he had done—keeping his promise not to kill Phoebe, treating her wounds after the car accident, even making the occasional lighthearted joke. She vividly remembered all these moments that had made her sure he had turned over a new leaf. And yet now, as she looked into his eyes, she saw none of that.

She tried to respond to his question, but she didn't know what to say. Her whole body started trembling. Images swirled through her

mind of Uncle Bill behind bars, Arvis's ruined heaven, and the cruel man standing before her.

“You were too proud to accept a gift of a mere pen, and now you're making this unilateral request? Have you no sense of shame?” he asked, cocking his head.

She bit her lip to try to stop from sobbing, but it was no use. However, Matthias made no reaction.

“I don't accept deals that I get nothing out of,” he said.

“Your Grace, please...”

“I'm sorry, but your tears and pleading won't make up for what Bill Remmer did.”

“Your Grace, we could never afford to pay for the repairs...”

“I'm not talking about monetary compensation, Layla. I'm just talking about a fair deal—you want something from me, so it's only natural that I expect something from you.” He gripped her chin in his palm. “If we can agree on such a deal, I will consider dropping the charges against Mr. Remmer.”

“A deal...?”

“Yes, a deal.” He carefully looked her up and down, as if he were appraising her worth.

When she realized what he was doing, she flinched and stepped backward.

He readily let go of her chin and calmly sat back down on the sofa.

She glared at him. Her body was still trembling, but with anger now, rather than fear. “I can't do that!” She shook her head so hard that her hair came undone and flowed down her back. “You're engaged to Miss Claudine. You're going to be married soon!”

“So?” he asked as he used his handkerchief to wipe her tears from his hand. There was no guilt or hesitation on his face. Rather, he was starting to look bored.

As she staggered in shock, the phone started to ring. He slowly stood up and walked over to the phone. Before he picked up the receiver, he turned to her and said, “The choice is yours. Tell me

when you've made up your mind. I'll respect whatever decision you make."

"B-but, h-how can I..."

"You can leave now." With that, he turned his back to her and lifted the receiver. He instantly looked dignified again. There was no trace of the man who had just made such an indecent proposal. Instead, as he talked to someone about his grandmother's condition, he looked like a perfect gentleman—a gentleman to whom someone like Layla Llewellyn was nothing.

She stood staring at him for a moment, then turned around with faltering steps. The cabin was still brightly lit, but everything looked dark before her.

She walked partway down the cabin's exterior stairway, before slumping down to sit on one of the steps. Her hunched-over body was dimly illuminated by the cold moonlight reflected on the river. She felt like she had just awoken from a dream—a beautiful but brutal nightmare.

# Chapter 68:
## Willing To Do Anything

“You're just getting back now, Layla?” asked Chef Mona, who had been pacing in front of Bill's cottage. “How did it go? Did you meet with the lawyer? What did he say?”

Layla just lightly shook her head in response to each of the questions Mona flung at her.

A number of Arvis staff members, feeling sorry for Bill, had put together enough money for Layla to secretly go to a law office and speak with a lawyer about the case. She had thanked them profusely for the money before heading off with a hopeful look on her face. Now, however, her face was full of despair.

“From what I hear,” Mona continued, “Dowager Herhardt wants to forgive Bill for everything, but Lady Herhardt is being stubborn. I don't get it... He didn't do it on purpose, so why not forgive him?”

“Do you think I could meet with Lady Herhardt?”

“I don't know if that's such a good idea, Layla. What about meeting with the duke instead? I heard from one of Dowager Herhardt's maids that she and Lady Herhardt have agreed to let him decide what to do.”

As soon as she heard this, Layla felt dizzy and started to stagger. Mona rushed to catch her before she could fall down, then she guided her into the cottage and sat her down in a chair in front of the fireplace. “Honestly, I think it's lucky for us that they've entrusted the duke with the decision. For this kind of incident, I think he's more likely to be sympathetic to Bill than his mom or grandma is. So, let's not give up hope yet, Layla.” She gently patted Layla's trembling shoulders. “My oh my, you're wasting away. At this rate, you're going to be in worse shape than Bill soon. You should eat something. I brought some of your favorite dishes over.”

“Thank you, Mona. I'll have some... in a little while,” Layla muttered.

Looking down at her with pity, Mona let out a few sighs before leaving the cottage. When she heard the front door close, Layla put her face in her hands.

The lawyer had given her an even more dismal response than the police officer had. He had said that if Bill was lucky, he might be able to avoid a prison sentence, but the civil suit was going to take a long time and cost a lot of money. He had added that since they wouldn't be able to avoid owing the Herhardt family compensation money, it would be foolish to start a legal battle with them. Ultimately, he told her that her best bet was to try to get the family to drop the charges.

She would have to ask the Herhardts to drop the charges. Or rather, she would have to ask the duke. Again.

It had already been three days since she had gone to see him at his cabin. Since then, she had struggled with the thought of the unspeakably vile deal he had suggested.

Chewing nervously at her lip, she got up and went to the kitchen. She lacked the energy even to make a cup of tea, so she just had a few sips of cold water. After barely eating or sleeping for the previous few days, her whole body felt empty.

As bad as she was doing, she was sure that Uncle Bill was doing even worse. When she had visited him at the police station, he had looked as if he had aged several years. It pained her heart to think about it.

She sat at the dining table in a daze. With Kyle gone, and Uncle Bill in jail, she felt lonelier than she had ever felt.

*I can't go on living like this,* she thought. *So, I need to save Uncle Bill, one way or another. But the only way to do that is by agreeing to the deal the duke suggested.* She turned the matter over and over in her head, but there was no other way.

Gritting her teeth, she stood up, but she couldn't make it a single step before she slumped back down in the chair. She thought of the way the duke had looked at her, and her whole body started to tremble with shame.

If he had been looking at her with lust, she wouldn't have felt as humiliated. Instead, his gaze had been calm and composed, and perhaps a little amused. She knew that look well. It was the same look he had on his face when he went hunting, as well as when he was cruelly tormenting her.

She tried to stand up a few more times, before finally letting her upper body collapse onto the table. Her eyes remained dry, but she let out a series of sorrowful moans.

Even if others saw her as nothing, she valued the life she had made for herself very highly. She had worked hard to get where she was, and she intended to continue doing so without shame. She couldn't let her life be trampled on for the sake of one man's petty desire.

Just as she reaffirmed this decision, however, she thought of Uncle Bill. What would become of him? The mere thought of his name put her back to square one.

Soon darkness fell. She stayed at the table, not lifting her head for a long time.

* * *

By the time Matthias had read and signed the last document, it was quite late at night. “You can go,” he told his assistant.

Mark Evers quietly gathered up the documents and left, leaving Matthias alone in the cabin. Matthias had always spent a fair amount of time in the cabin, but he was spending even more time than usual now that the mansion had no electricity. Of course, that wasn't the only reason.

Layla was going to pay him another visit tonight. It was just a gut feeling, but he was fairly confident it was right. She had spent a few days trying to find another way to save Bill Remmer. By now, she would have realized that this was the only way.

The night that Bill had been taken into custody for causing the explosion, Matthias had seen her collapsed on the ground, crying. At that moment, he knew he had found a way to clip that beautiful

bird's wings and stop her from escaping. Having found the way, he was carrying it out. It was that simple.

Of course, he knew that it wouldn't get him the happiness that he most wanted. But before he could get that, he needed to ensure that she would stay near him. In the end, he was going to get the happiness he desired, even if it meant having to turn the order of things upside down.

Picking up his cigarette case from the table, he took out a cigarette and placed it between his lips but did not light it.

*Knock knock knock.*

Just then, he heard a faint knocking at the door. It was a weak, reluctant knock.

He tossed the unlit cigarette into the ashtray and slowly stood up from the sofa. After taking a moment to calm himself, he walked to the door and opened it.

A strong, cold wind blew in immediately. Standing in the path of that wind was just the person he had expected—Layla.

They stared at each other in silence for a moment. If it weren't for the movement of her hair and clothes fluttering in the wind, he might have thought that time had stopped.

Finally, he took a step backward to give her space to enter. It was an unusually cold winter night, and yet she didn't even have a coat on. She stood, shivering, for a moment, then stepped over the threshold.

The sound of him closing and locking the door rang out through the frigid air.

* * *

She walked to the spot where a few days earlier, she had begged him to drop the charges against Bill. She stood there with the same posture but a completely different look on her face. The naive trust and hope were gone, replaced by fear and resignation. Nonetheless, Matthias still put on a show of acting respectfully towards her, sitting cross-legged on the sofa just as he had the previous time.

After a few deep breaths, she asked, “Your Grace, I'm nothing to you, right?”

He chuckled at her despondent tone. “Right. So what?”

“Well, if you're willing to leave a stain on your life for the sake of your lust for a woman who is nothing to you... won't that harm your reputation? That doesn't seem like a favorable exchange.” Her eyes seemed to light up faintly. “So please, ask something else of me. Anything. Whatever it is, I'll do it. Really.”

“Layla,” he said in a derisive tone, “my family has a castle in a resort in southern Berg.”

This abrupt comment made her eyes waver.

“The castle was famous all over the empire for its beauty, so my grandfather purchased it. For his mistress. She lived in the castle, receiving my grandfather's affection until eventually, she passed away.”

“Your Grace...”

“My father was a music aficionado. He thus liked to spend time with women who were talented at music. The longest relationship he had with a mistress was with a famous soprano. Even my mother liked her. She was that great of a singer.” He sank into reminiscence for a moment, then looked at Layla again. “Now, do you need me to tell you about those men's reputations?”

The friendly tone with which he was saying all this made Layla lose the last trace of her fighting spirit. She didn't need him to tell her about their reputations. She already knew. How could she not? Even after their deaths, the two previous dukes remained famous and highly respected throughout the city.

“Anyway, thanks for your concern, but I'm not worried about my reputation. Now, have you made up your mind?” he asked, lifting his gaze from her chest, which was rising and falling rapidly with her breathing, to her dazed eyes.

She looked behind her a few times, then finally met his gaze. “J-just... just one night, right?”

She had already resolved to accept his offer the moment she had

decided to return to his cabin. She had been hanging on to a sliver of hope that there was another way, but it seemed that there was not. She was nothing to him, and yet she was very proud of her life. But apparently, she wasn't even significant enough to tarnish his reputation.

As she realized this, it actually made her feel a little better. *It doesn't have to be a big deal,* she thought. *It'll be like I fell from a tree and got hurt. Only, my injuries will, unfortunately be quite deep. But injuries eventually heal, and I'll be able to get up, brush myself off, and go on my way. No matter what.*

While she was trying to prepare herself, a grin spread across Matthias's face. “I told you, Layla. I don't accept deals that I get nothing out of. Do you really think just one night is enough to make up for all the damage your uncle caused?”

“Then are you saying... you really intend to take me as your mistress?”

He simply continued smiling at her without saying anything in response.

Eventually, she couldn't take it anymore. She turned and started walking towards the door. But after only a few steps, she stopped.

She knew that if she were to leave the cabin now, her last hope would vanish. Uncle Bill would go to prison, and there would be a long, arduous civil case. Even once it was all over, they would never be able to return to the life they had led before.

Gritting her teeth, she turned back towards him. Having anticipated all this, he was sitting on the sofa, calmly watching her.

*Yes,* she thought. *That's just the kind of person he is. He'll gladly ruin someone's life just to get what he wants. And he won't even feel bad about it. He'll use me for his amusement and then throw me away, like one of the birds that he shoots and then leaves for dead.*

As she glared at him with tear-filled eyes, he snickered and rose from his seat. She couldn't run away, and yet she bristled at the thought of staying where she was. Eventually, she collapsed to the floor. Wholly unfazed, he walked up to her and got down on one

knee.

"…!"

As he started to unbutton the top button of her blouse, she reflexively put her hands over the rest of the buttons and pulled back from him.

"Layla," he said. His voice was quiet and cold, but his breath felt hot on her cheek. "You said you were willing to do anything." He smiled and gently brushed his finger against the back of her hand, which was clutching her blouse. Then he forcefully grabbed her chin and made her turn her head. "If you don't want to, there's the door." Then he let go as if to tell her that the choice was entirely up to her.

She hated what he was doing—cornering her into doing what he wanted while acting like he was giving her a free choice. She felt like he was trampling on her heart.

"I will never forgive you for this," she muttered as she weakly let go of her blouse.

"Well, that's up to you," he replied, snickering. He grabbed her blouse with both hands and ripped it open. Several buttons popped off and scattered across the floor.

As she was pushed backwards onto the floor, she heard a soft whisper.

"I'm looking forward to it, Layla."

She wanted nothing more than to shout curses at him, but she couldn't. Before she knew what was happening, his lips were already pressed against hers.

His tongue darted into her mouth and their breaths mingled. She tried to get away, but it was no use. His body was pressing her down with overwhelming force.

Her experience became disjointed. She heard the wet sounds of his biting and sucking. She felt the slimy sensation of their saliva dribbling down her chin and the strength and heat in his large hands as he pulled up her skirt and pulled her stockings down from her garters. The sound of fast breathing and moans disturbed the

quiet night. Soon he used his superior strength to pull her knees apart. He removed her skirt and underwear at once and threw them to the side, then settled down between her legs.

“Pretty,” he said as if he were admiring his own creation.

# Chapter 69:
## Savior

Matthias was roused from his reverie by the sound of Layla faintly whispering.

“You promised...”

Still inside of her, he lifted his head and saw her green eyes staring back at him. He let go of her hair, which he had been clutching quite forcefully, and put his hand on her flushed cheek.

“You promised... you would drop... the charges…” she whispered as she struggled to catch her breath.

When he understood what she was saying, he let out a hollow laugh. He was surprised that she was pleading with him so desperately even at a moment like this. However, he didn't mind it. Her eyes were as beautiful as precious gems, no matter why they were fixed on him.

When he made no response, she strained to lift her hand from the floor and grabbed his arm.

When he saw that she was on the verge of tears, he reluctantly gave her a nod. She then breathed a sigh of relief and let go of his arm and closed her eyes. He continued to gaze at her.

*One more time.* Filled with a desire he didn't fully understand, he continued gazing at her for a long while, but nothing changed. With her eyes shut and her head turned to the side, all he could detect from her face was stubborn refusal.

He snickered and clutched her hair again to pull her towards him. The pain caused her to open her eyes again.

Calmly observing the fear in her eyes, he went in for another kiss.

*A fair deal indeed,* he thought to himself.

* * *

Layla awoke to a room full of bright morning light. She struggled to sit up and lean against her bed's headboard. She briefly

entertained the hopeful thought that what had happened was a nightmare. But this hope was quickly extinguished when she saw the painful marks that had been left all over her body.

After coming back from the cabin the previous night, she had collapsed in bed and fallen asleep immediately. As much as she had wanted to rid her body of all traces of him, she hadn't had the strength. It had taken all her effort just to make it back to the cottage without passing out.

Her body was covered with hand marks, bloodstains, and another sort of stain that she didn't want to think about. She shuddered as she got out of bed. Her body ached so much, it felt like it was going to fall apart. With each step towards the bathroom, feelings of pain triggered painful memories that made her want to cry.

*It's no big deal,* she told herself as she scrubbed and scrubbed her body. *In the grand scheme of things, it's nothing.* She clung to this delusion, even though she knew it was patently false.

This enabled her to regain most of her composure by the time she had gotten dressed and sat down at the dining table.

*Okay. Eat something for strength, then go see Uncle Bill.*

Focusing on the tasks before her, she put some of the food Chef Mona had brought over onto a plate. She had absolutely no appetite, but she managed to choke down a few bites with water. After finishing as much as she could stand to eat, she noticed the stack of envelopes at the edge of the table.

As soon as she slid the stack towards her, a look of devastation fell over her face. The envelopes were all from Kyle. She couldn't believe it at first, so she looked through the stack. Every one of them bore her name in his unmistakable handwriting.

She went into a daze for a moment, then picked up the envelope on top with trembling hands and opened it.

It was a letter that Kyle had sent at the beginning of the previous autumn. She began to read it.

*My beloved Layla...*

* * *

“Thank you, Your Grace. I really don't know what to say,” Bill said, bowing repeatedly to the duke. His face looked haggard after several days in jail, but his eyes were full of liveliness. “I can't believe you dropped the charges when...” He trailed off, teary-eyed, overcome by emotion.

Luckily, Layla entered the police station after Bill had stopped crying.

“Layla!” Bill's sonorous voice rang out through the halls of the station.

Everyone's eyes turned towards Layla, even those of Duke Herhardt and his lawyer, who had come to the station to drop the charges against Bill.

“Uncle Bill! What's all this...?” The cheerful look on her face disappeared the moment she made eye contact with the duke.

“Congratulations, Layla. His Grace, the duke has dropped all charges against Mr. Remmer,” an officer said as he walked up to Layla.

“Ah... yes,” she replied, reluctantly looking at Matthias again.

He was looking back at her with an indifferent expression on his face as if he had no memory of what had happened the previous night.

“Thank you so much, Your Grace,” she said, bowing her head deeply as she fought to suppress all the emotions surging inside her. Her hands started to tingle, and her eyes trembled.

She was feeling very awkward, but luckily no one seemed to notice other than Duke Herhardt himself.

While his lawyer talked with the police officers, Matthias made eye contact with Layla again. She stared straight back at him, her lips pursed tightly together.

*If you want to put on a brave show for me,* he thought, *you should start by hiding your trembling hands.* He snickered.

While he could have simply sent his lawyer to the station alone, Matthias had come along so that he could see Layla Llewellyn, his

cheeky mistress.

His memory transported him back to the previous night in the cabin. After things quieted down, he looked almost as disheveled as she did. His shirt had blood on it and was missing buttons, and his hair was drenched with sweat. He laughed at himself and got up.

She was lying on the carpet, her body scrunched up into a ball. The light from the fireplace faintly glowed on her bare skin.

Other than her shoes and the stockings around her ankles, she had nothing on. The sound of her breathing mingled with the crackling of the fire.

After putting back on his clothes, he sat on the sofa and gazed at her. He felt grateful that she had stubbornly turned her face away from him.

Her long, tangled hair was covering her back and shoulders. Her pale rear and thighs were splotched with bloodstains and his hand marks. He liked that her skin was so easy to leave marks on.

He thought about calling her name, then changed his mind and reached for a cigarette with more urgency than usual. After placing it between his lips, however, he forgot to light it.

His gaze slowly drifted to her feet, then even more slowly traversed her body up to her head. It grated at his nerves the way she was lying motionless. He knew that if he wanted, he could grab her with one hand and make her submit to him again. But he didn't want that.

He squashed the unlit cigarette and tossed it into the ashtray. His brow furrowed as he thought about how he hadn't had the patience to bring her the short distance from the drawing room to the bedroom. He knew that doing so wouldn't have changed much, but perhaps he wouldn't have felt as dirty as rolling around on the floor with her had made him feel.

Deciding that he was going to make her get up whether she wanted to or not, he rose from his seat. As soon as he took his first step towards her, her body noticeably stiffened up. Amazed that she was still stubbornly keeping her face pointed away from him, he

quietly chuckled.

He took his jacket from the chair it was draped over and threw it onto her shivering body. She flinched but remained turned away from him. For a moment, he felt uncertain which of them this experience was more shameful for.

He took a deep breath to quiet the self-loathing he was feeling, then walked to the bathroom. Something about her was getting on his nerves, but he wasn't sure what to do about it. What made him even more confused was the fact that, amidst this irritation, he was feeling happy and satisfied. After taking a shower, he decided he would try to console her. Thus, he felt all the more flustered when he returned to the drawing room, only to find it empty.

She had escaped. He came to this embarrassing conclusion after searching all over the cabin. All that she had left behind were the buttons from her blouse and several strands of golden hair.

When he saw that she had neatly placed his jacket back on the chair, he burst into perverse laughter. He pictured her running along the forest path in the middle of this frigid winter night, holding the sides of her buttonless blouse together. That was how much she hated being near him.

As he stood in the police station, thinking back on these memories, he knew that he had only refrained from chasing after her because his patience had reached its limit. If he had run into her again, he probably would not have treated her very kindly.

Seeing her before him now only made him more certain of that, as it rekindled the bad feelings he had felt upon being left alone.

“You've made a truly commendable decision, Your Grace. You are deserving of all the respect that the House of Herhardt has received for generations.”

The police officer's words of praise brought Matthias's awareness back into the present. He humbly thanked the officer, then left the station.

Not only Bill and Layla, but also several of the officers followed him out the door to bid farewell. His assistant and chauffeur

hurriedly got out of the car to greet him.

“Your Grace, I won't forget your kindness till the day I day,” said Bill. “In fact, even after I die, I still won't forget it. Truly, I won't.”

“It was nothing, Mr. Remmer,” Matthias replied, glancing briefly at the woman standing next to the gardener.

Her eyes shone beautifully as she looked back at him, or rather, scowled back at him.

“I'll see you back at Arvis,” he said before getting into the car.

He looked at her again through the car window; she still wasn't smiling. Turning away, he started to grin. He was determined to see her in a disheveled state once again.

* * *

“You're staying at Arvis? How?” Layla asked in disbelief.

Bill patted her head, unable to hide his joy. They had walked back from the city, and Arvis's front gate was up ahead.

“It's thanks to the duke,” he replied.

“What?”

“He said we can keep living in the cottage by the hunting ground, and I can keep doing the gardening for Arvis.”

“But...”

“Naturally, I tried to turn down the offer. How could I keep working like before after the shame of causing such a big accident? I asked him. You know what the duke said to that? He said that the best way I could make up for my mistake was to work my hardest to get the plants in the greenhouse looking like they used to. He said that since I'm the one who made the greenhouse into Arvis's heaven, I should be the one to bring that heaven back. And you know, I think he's got the point!” As he reflected on this, Bill's eyes started to well up with tears.

The days he had spent in jail had been a living hell. More than his fear of his own life being ruined, he had been tormented by guilt over the thought that if he got a prison sentence, he would be leaving Layla all alone.

“Did Dowager and Lady Herhardt approve this decision as well?”

“Dowager Herhardt happily agreed to it, and Lady Herhardt agreed after the duke persuaded her. I'm telling you, Layla, we have the duke to thank for all of this. He's truly our savior.”

*Savior.*

She started to feel dizzy when she heard Bill say this word, which seemed so out of place when applied to such a cruel man.

*I absolutely can't let Uncle Bill find out.*

As she repeated this internally, she managed to calm herself to some extent, but her heart kept on beating furiously.

“After decades of tending to them, Arvis's garden and greenhouse feel like a part of me, Layla. After destroying the greenhouse, I thought I was going to be racked with guilt for the rest of my life. Now that I've been given a chance to restore it, I feel like a huge weight has been lifted. And I feel like it's a way I can repay the duke for his kindness.”

“Yes, Uncle Bill...” she replied, unable to hide the shakiness in her voice.

“But you don't need to worry anymore, Layla. From now on, I'm going to be as careful as can be. For your sake.”

Stopping in front of Arvis's lofty gate, he placed his hand on her shoulder. His haggard face was full of life.

“Bill! You're really back!”

A crowd of staff members rushed towards them. As they greeted Bill, Layla gazed at the iron bars of Arvis's gate, to which the golden crest of the House of Herhardt was affixed.

They looked like beautifully wrought prison bars.

# Chapter 70:
## You Are Nothing

“You've made the right decision, Miss Llewellyn. There's no better place to teach than at our village school,” the principal said, smiling joyfully.

Sitting across from him at his drawing-room table, Layla smiled faintly and lowered her eyes, looking embarrassed at her sudden change of heart. “I'm sorry for causing you undue worry by asking to transfer.”

“Not at all, Miss Llewellyn. I'm just glad you're staying. But I did want to ask you... Do you really have no interest in seeing Theo again?”

“Pardon? Theo...? Ah!” It took her a moment to recall that this was the name of the son of the owner of the general store.

Luckily, the principal's wife walked in just then, carrying a tea tray. “Don't pressure her, honey,” she said. “You're embarrassing her!”

“I wasn't trying to pressure her, I just think it's a shame,” he replied. “Theo is such a nice young man.” He scrutinized Layla's face. She looked uncomfortable. He wondered if she considered the son of a merchant to be beneath her since she had previously been engaged to a doctor's son. Surely, she had realized by now that setting one's sights so high was unwise, however. After silently musing for a moment, he chuckled awkwardly and changed the subject. “By the way, Miss Llewellyn, what would you say to being cast in the play at next year's benefit? I think it would greatly increase our donations.”

This unexpected joke caused Layla to burst into laughter. It was the first sincere laughter that she had laughed in a long time.

They discussed the school, the students, and Layla's plans for the next semester as they drank their teas. Then she left the principal's home. Amid the crowds of people quickly walking down the

sidewalk on this unusually cold evening, she alone was walking quite slowly. She didn't like being out in the cold, but she didn't particularly feel like rushing back to Arvis, either.

After sauntering through the shopping district, gazing into shop windows without really paying attention to what she saw, she came to a stop in the middle of the square in front of Karlsbar Central Station.

*What if I were to get on a train and leave Karlsbar right now...?*

As soon as this thought popped into her mind, she knew it was just a vain fantasy. She couldn't leave. How could she abandon Uncle Bill? And where would she even go? Even if she could persuade Uncle Bill to come with her, the duke would surely track them down. This could leave her in an even worse situation than the one she was already in. To put an end to these frustrating thoughts, she closed her eyes and resignedly turned around.

The duke's intentions in allowing Uncle Bill to continue living and working at Arvis were clear. It was because of nothing more than his petty lust for her. Now that he had slept with her, he would probably soon tire of her and cast her aside. She felt even more certain of this than she had been before. After all, he had let her know that night exactly what she meant to him.

*Please let him tire of me as soon as possible,* she silently prayed as she turned onto Platanus Road.

Just then, she thought of the letters from Kyle.

*My beloved Layla—*

He had started each of the dozens of letters the same way. She had read and reread each of them that morning. She didn't need to ask Uncle Bill why he had kept the letters from her. She understood why he had felt he had no other choice. This only made her sadder, however.

*"Oh, Layla, about the letters that I left here on the table..."* Bill had said the morning after he had returned from the police station. *"I'm sorry."*

She had remained silent, with a gentle smile on her face.

*"I guess I have quite a few reasons to feel ashamed in front of you,"* he had added.

The pale winter sunlight had made his graying hair look white that morning.

*"I want to let you know, Layla, if you still have feelings for Kyle, I'm going to support you fully,"* he had said with a look of determination in his eyes. *"It was wrong of me to try to decide what path you should take in life. I realize that now, and I'm sorry."*

He had continued to apologize, but she hadn't been in the mood to listen.

*"I'm fine,"* she had finally said. *"Now, let's eat breakfast, Uncle Bill."*

He had gazed at her melancholy smile for a moment, then nodded and started eating. Neither of them finished their meal that morning.

Before passing through Arvis's gate, she took a deep breath and clenched her fists.

*If I'm nothing to him, then he's nothing to me.* She thought this every time memories of the night with the duke flashed into her mind. *Since he's nothing to me, he can't hurt me.*

Her legs were shaking, and her fists were growing clammy, but she walked through the gate with confidence. Because of her hurried pace, she was almost out of breath by the time she arrived at the cottage.

She rushed inside and let out a sigh of relief. Bill was determined to pay back the kindness the duke had shown him, so he had been working on restoring the plants in the greenhouse every day from early morning to late at night. Thus, the cottage was empty.

She staggered to her room and collapsed onto the bed.

*My beloved Layla—*

She couldn't stop thinking about the letters from Kyle, so she shut her eyes to block out the thoughts. As soon as she did, however, her

mind was flooded with memories of the night with the duke. Just when she was about to break down in tears, she heard a tapping at her window. While this sound had used to fill her with excitement, it now made her feel only fear.

She parted the curtains with her cold, trembling hands and opened the window. Phoebe was there with a note from the duke.

* * *

"Did you really have to allow the gardener to keep working at Arvis?" Claudine quietly asked, maintaining the smile on her face. Everyone gathered in the mansion's drawing room looked at her.

Her mother, sitting next to her, flashed her a look that seemed to say, *Be quiet!*

Claudine didn't back down, however. "Dropping the charges against that foolish gardener was a noble gesture. But I'm not sure that allowing him to stay at Arvis is the wisest choice, Duke Herhardt. Who's to say he won't cause another accident?"

"I understand your concern, my lady," Matthias replied, also smiling, "but it's important to remember that Bill Remmer himself cultivated the plants in the greenhouse that you so loved. If we want to restore it to its former glory, there's no better person for the job than him."

Despite Matthias's friendly tone, Claudine could sense that he had no intention of changing his mind.

"I certainly do love Arvis's heaven," she replied. "If he's our only hope of getting it back, then sure, I suppose it's worth keeping him on staff for a while."

Countess Brandt breathed a sigh of relief when she heard her daughter making this concession.

The conversation progressed from the state of Dowager Herhardt's recovery from her injuries to the public's praise for the Herhardt family's decision to drop the charges against their employee to the preparations for the upcoming wedding. Claudine maintained her smile and her refined conversational skills

throughout. No one could tell that she was thinking about Layla the whole time.

She was certain that Matthias had slept with her. He was that kind of man. When there was something he wanted, he would do whatever was necessary to get it. There was no way that someone like Layla could evade him.

When Claudine had heard about the accident at Arvis, she had felt both sadness and relief at once—sadness that her beloved greenhouse had been destroyed but relief at the thought that this meant that the gardener, and thus Layla, would have to leave Arvis.

Of course, she knew that Layla leaving Arvis wouldn't mean the end of Matthias's affair with her. But that was between Matthias and Layla. She just wanted Layla gone from Arvis before she moved in. She planned to be a tolerant wife, but not tolerant enough to be all right with her husband keeping a mistress at their estate!

Now she feared, however, that Matthias was planning to do just that since he had allowed the gardener to stay at Arvis.

*"If I were you, Claudine, I'd be careful not to provoke Matthias,"* Riette had told her a few days earlier. *"If their affair is already over, that's great. If not, then your best move is probably just to sit back and let it run its course."* He had delivered this inscrutable advice with a more serious look on his face than usual.

Claudine had neither agreed with him nor even understood his motivation for saying it.

She knew exactly for whom Matthias had decided to let the gardener stay at Arvis. *I can't believe Layla is able to control Duke Herhardt like that,* she thought. *She looks innocent, but apparently, she's actually quite adept at manipulating men.*

As she grew tired of thinking about Matthias and Layla, she made an effort to participate in the dinner with even more grace and enthusiasm. By the time the meal was over, she was dead tired. Fortunately, Dowager and Lady Herhardt had mentioned earlier that they would be going to bed early, so the dinner ended earlier than usual.

Later that evening, Countess Brandt visited her daughter in the guest bedroom where she was staying. “I didn't say anything earlier because Matthias was there, but I feel the same way as you. It makes no sense to keep the gardener on staff after he caused such a huge accident. Things like this show how indulgent the Herhardt family can be.”

Claudine, who had been gazing out the window at the ruined greenhouse, turned around and smiled calmly at her mother. “Don't worry, Mother. The gardener will only be here until next summer at the latest.”

“What are you saying, Claudine? Don't tell me you're planning to fire the gardener that Dowager Herhardt and Matthias have so much faith in!”

“All I'm saying is that it's only natural for a new duchess to want a new gardener.”

* * *

“I've finished the preparations you requested,” Hessen quietly told Matthias. Matthias glanced down at the large, dome-shaped silver cloche in front of him on the table in the cabin's drawing room. “Well done,” he said. He then moved to the sofa, as usual.

Hessen gave him the day's mail, then left the cabin. It was mostly invitations to end-of-the-year parties and social events. There was also a letter informing him that the crown prince and crown princess would be visiting Arvis early the following year as part of their tour of the northern part of the empire.

He took his fountain pen out of his coat pocket and started writing a response. After finishing the response and signing it, he put the cap back on the pen and chuckled.

*Layla Llewellyn.*

The name, inscribed in gold lettering, glittered in the dim light from the fireplace. He had been using the pen since the previous autumn. He had first started using it for fun but had soon grown accustomed to it.

*"Why do you keep stealing my things?"* He laughed whenever he thought about the way Layla had accused him of stealing. He especially found her next question amusing: *"Are you... a raven?"*

Twirling the pen between his long fingers, he checked his wristwatch. *Should be any minute now,* he thought. Just then, he heard a knock at the door.

Putting the pen back in his coat pocket, he got up and opened the door. It was just the person he had expected—his mistress, Layla.

# Chapter 71:
## Throw It Out

Just like the previous night, Matthias slowly stepped back, and Layla, despite her nerves, stepped over the threshold. Unlike the previous night, however, she took the lead this time. Walking straight down the hall, she headed not for the drawing room, but the bedroom.

Matthias followed right behind her, not questioning what she was doing. She was always surprising him, and he looked forward to whatever unexpected thing she had in store for him tonight. And sure enough, she did not disappoint.

After pausing for a brief moment with her hand on the doorknob, she opened the bedroom door wide. He furrowed his brow as he watched her.

He thought about calling out to her, then changed his mind and silently entered the bedroom. His curiosity was increasing, as he continued to wonder what unexpected delights she was going to give him.

He casually leaned against the closed door with his arms crossed and looked at her. She was standing in the middle of the bedroom, catching her breath. After a moment, she walked over to the bed. She removed her glasses and placed them on the bedside table, then took off her scarf, coat, and gloves.

The note he had sent Phoebe to her with had contained a single sentence: *I've done my part, so you'd better do yours too.* The outrage that she felt upon reading it had made her body go stiff. She had then collapsed to the floor when she recalled what he had said to her the previous night, smiling at her like a cat that had cornered a mouse: *"If you're my mistress, then you should act like it, Layla."*

Eventually she managed to put the thoughts out of her mind, but they had continued to flash back into her consciousness throughout the day. She was experiencing an immense amount of pain and

shame. And the fact that she wasn't able to do what she wanted made her feel even more despair.

Without considering any of that, it was clear to her that the things the duke did to her were not acts of love. However, they weren't the acts of a brute, either. He wasn't simply following an instinctual drive.

*"It's fun to see you cry, and I enjoy hearing you beg."* This sentence, which he had said to her on a beautiful summer night the previous year, had then flashed into her mind. As she had remained sitting on the floor in front of her open window, she remembered the next thing he had said with a smile: *"So, Layla, cry, or better yet, beg."*

*That's it,* she had thought. *That's why he's doing this to me. Because he enjoys seeing me cry and beg. Just like he enjoys hunting, he enjoys tormenting me like this...*

Upon reaching this conclusion, she had burst into empty laughter. She hated that she kept looking for other reasons for his behavior, when the true explanation was so simple.

*"Layla!"*

The sound of Uncle Bill calling her name had finally motivated her to get up. She had closed the window, drawn the curtains, and wiped the tears from her eyes before going to him.

She had also made a resolution for herself. From then on, she was never going to beg or cry in front of the duke. She hoped that if she denied him those pleasures, he would grow tired of her faster and discard her.

After thinking back on all that as she stood by the bed in the cabin, she proceeded to remove her blouse, skirt, and shoes. Removing her undergarments took more courage, but after a moment she started to do so. Considering everything the duke had already done with her body, it was silly to hide it from him now. More than anything, she didn't want to feel like she was being forced. If she had to be here in the duke's bedroom, she was going to pretend to herself that it was her own choice.

Matthias let out a sigh as he gazed at her standing topless across

the room.

She stood for a moment with her arms folded, blocking her breasts from view, then lowered her arms and removed the rest of her undergarments, piece by piece. Finally, she removed her stockings, and stood before him without a thread of clothing on her.

He wondered if she had gone mad. There was no other explanation for her sudden shift in attitude.

She gathered her clothes from the floor and placed them on a chair next to the bed, then pulled out the pin holding up her hair and let her smooth, blonde locks tumble down to her shoulders.

Matthias's eyes remained still, but his breath had started to quicken slightly.

Realizing that he had been gripping his arm quite tightly, he let go and swept his hair back from his forehead. As he did this, she sat down at the foot of the bed. Despite the boldness with which she had just undressed, her whole body was now trembling.

He slowly walked up to her. Unsure where to look, she lowered her eyes and stared at her feet.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he grabbed her chin.

She looked straight into his eyes right away. “I'm doing my part,” she replied. While her tone was harsh, the shakiness in her voice made her sound harmless.

“And what's your part?” he asked, narrowing his eyes in amusement.

A frightened look appeared in her eyes, but she confidently replied, “You already know.” Her shoulders twitched, but she maintained eye contact. “You decided on my role when you set the deal.”

His gaze moved down from her face to her chest, which was quickly rising and falling with her breath, and then moved to her hands, which were clasped together on her lap.

*It's like she's an elegant noblewoman, only naked,* he thought, lifting his gaze to her face again. When he saw her large eyes, a dry laugh escaped his lips. *I wonder if paying a lady of the night to sleep with me*

*would make me feel as dirty as I do right now.* Soon his laughter faded, and only coldness remained in his eyes.

He patted her on the head, as if telling her she was doing a good job. His touch felt soft and relaxed. His grin gave the same impression.

Just as she was starting to get an ominous feeling, he grabbed her throat tightly, almost choking her. As her face started to go pale, he pushed her back onto the bed and got on top of her.

As he was doing so, he chuckled. The mirror hanging above the marble mantelpiece was showing his reflection. Instead of seeing the old Matthias von Herhardt, the perfect gentleman who had lived a serene, orderly life, he now saw a man in the clutches of passion, his face twisted in the desperate pursuit for the object of his desire.

* * *

As Layla's heavy breathing quieted down, Matthias got out of the bed. This fact barely registered with her as she lay face down, exhausted.

*Good,* she thought. *It's over. Good.* To avoid provoking his desire again, she remained still as a corpse for several minutes, clutching the wrinkled sheet, hoping that he would leave soon.

When she heard his footsteps grow faint, she breathed a sigh of relief. She felt like her body would fall apart if she had to do anything more with him.

However, she soon realized that her relief was premature. His faint footsteps started to grow louder again. Her knuckles were white as she clutched the sheet. She wasn't sure if he had reentered the bedroom. She could have found out by simply looking up, but she hated the thought of making eye contact with him again.

While she lay there, helplessly praying that he would leave, the now fully dressed duke sat down on the bed next to her. Chuckling, he playfully ran his fingers through her hair a few times, then whispered, “Good job, Layla.”

As he continued to caress her hair, she felt a deep, mortifying

feeling of indignity. Her hands started to shake.

*Don't cry,* she told herself.

Throughout the long, dreadful night, she had not cried once. She certainly wasn't going to let herself cry now.

Before long, she heard the sound of the bedroom door closing, and then the sound of the cabin's front door opening and closing. He was finally gone.

Only then did she sit up. She rubbed her swollen lips and saw that they were a little bloody. It stung, but it was a fairly minor wound.

She cautiously got out of bed and was suddenly confronted with her own image. It took her a moment before she realized she was looking into the mirror above the mantelpiece.

Ignoring the urge to look away, she stared at herself for a long while. *It was just another meaningless night with a man who means nothing to me,* she thought. Unfortunately, the pain lingering in her body wasn't easy to ignore.

Feeling too dirty to get dressed right away, she took a handkerchief from the pocket of her coat and wiped off her body. She had to stop a few times to calm her breathing, but she didn't cry. She was proud of herself for that.

She left the empty cabin and headed back towards the cottage. As she walked down the forest path, she tried to avoid the bright moonlight and stay in the shade. When she spotted a pebble or an acorn shell on the path, she casually kicked it aside, hoping that she could cast aside her memory of the night just as easily.

After arriving back at the cottage and tiptoeing to her room, she was reminded of Kyle's last letter. The opening line, which had been the same for every letter he had sent, flashed into her mind: *My beloved Layla...*

She had burned the rest of the letters in the heater in her room but hadn't been able to bring herself to burn the final one. She brought it to her bed and read it once again.

*My beloved Layla...*

*Want to get married?*

*That's right, I'm proposing to you again.*

*You might think it's a joke, but of all the countless times I've proposed so far, this time I'm more serious about it than ever.*

*My grandfather left me an inheritance. After my birthday in the spring, I'll be able to use that money however I want. It's not a huge amount of money, but it's enough to get a cozy house near the university for the two of us to live in. If you don't want to get married right away, I'm fine with waiting until after graduation. As long as we're together.*

*So, Layla, come to Ratse with me. I have no doubt that you'll be able to pass the entrance exam again, so we'll be able to go to college together. Do you remember all the fun things we used to talk about, ever since we were young? How I was going to become a doctor, and you were going to become an ornithologist? I still look forward to those days. When I envision my future, you are always part of it, as my best friend, my lover, and one day my wife and the mother of my children.*

*I love my parents, and I know how much they love me. That will never change. But that doesn't mean I'm willing to go down a path that I can't be happy on. The happiness my mom wants for me isn't the happiness I want. It's just her vain fantasy.*

*I hope that over time she will come to accept you. But if she never does, we'll just have to accept that that's the way it is. I'm not renouncing my family for your sake. I'm doing this for my sake. I'm pursuing the only life that will make me happy.*

*So, Layla, will you be my happiness?*

*Of course, I can't promise you a life of luxury, at least not right now. Without my parents' support, I don't have much yet. But what I can promise you, is that I will cherish you. You will be the whole world to me. And I won't let you get hurt, Layla.*

*Forget about everything else, and just listen to your heart. If you feel the same way I do, then tell me. I'll come get you. Let's go to a place where*

*we can be happy together.*

Layla read the letter over and over again, until dawn broke. Whenever she entertained the thought that a future with Kyle could be a reality, she was soon reminded of the nightmarish life that the duke was forcing her to live.

When she heard the sound of Bill stirring in his room, she got out of bed as well. Walking over to the heater in the corner of her room, she placed the precious letter into it. In a matter of seconds, it turned to ash and disappeared.

* * *

When Hessen returned to the cabin, he noticed that the cake he had laid out for the duke was untouched. He didn't want to bother his master with trivial matters, but he felt bad simply throwing it away. He had a hunch why the duke had asked him to order a cake from the tearoom in the finest hotel in the city, rather than having Arvis's skilled bakers make one. He also knew that the duke didn't have much of a sweet tooth. The cake thus clearly hadn't been for the duke himself.

Hessen took a few deep breaths, then entered the duke's bedroom. As usual, the duke listened to Hessen's report, then opened the newspaper.

"Shall I set out the cake for you again, Your Grace?"

The duke slowly looked up. "No. No need for that." He stared into space for a moment before shifting his gaze back to the newspaper.

"Then what shall I do with the cake…?" Hessen cautiously asked, knowing that it was a silly question.

Flipping through the pages of the newspaper, the duke indifferently replied, "Throw it out."

# Chapter 72:
## How Dare You Treat Me Like That?

One day, absentmindedly glancing out the car window, Matthias saw Layla. Dressed more stylishly than usual, she was walking down the sidewalk downtown with some other women her age. He recognized one of the women—it was the teacher who had come along on the field trip to Arvis. He seemed to recall her name being Mrs. Graeber.

He narrowed his eyes as he watched Layla. She looked gaunt, but she had a gentle, bright expression on her face. She was smiling and chatting with the other women cheerfully. There was such a stark contrast between this and the way she looked when she visited him in the cabin, he felt like he was looking at a different person.

Matthias's car passed by quickly, but he continued to gaze out the window for a while after Layla was no longer in sight. He was glad to see that she wasn't utterly miserable. However, something bothered him about seeing how differently she acted when she was away from him.

For the past few weeks since their deal had begun, Layla had been acting lifeless in his presence. She would arrive at the cabin with a bored expression on her face, then go straight to the bedroom where she would remove her clothes and sit on the bed like a factory worker performing a menial task. Of course, as disillusioned as she was acting, she couldn't hide the slight look of fear that appeared on her face when he approached her.

He respected his mistress's choice to act this way, even if he thought it was silly. If she wanted to act like a common whore, he was happy to oblige. However, when he treated her roughly or insulted her, he sometimes felt like he was the one who was really being used.

Since she was always acting like a lifeless doll, it came as a relief to him when she showed any sort of feeling, even if it was shame or

suffering. At least then he could tell that she was aware of his existence. He would thus try to treat her even worse, tormenting her to the point of tears. This always gave him a feeling of satisfaction. However, the feeling was always short lived. She would quickly stop crying and catch her breath, leaving him feeling empty and unsure what to do.

*How dare you treat me like that?*

The cold rage surging up inside of him brought him back to the night in late spring of the previous year, when the roses had been in full bloom at his mansion in Ratse. After his mother had informed him of Layla's engagement to Kyle Ettman, he had felt the desire to kill someone for the first time in his life. Whenever he saw Layla lying with her back to him, he wondered if the object of his murderous rage had actually been her, rather than the doctor's son.

Of course, the pleasure Layla gave him was still great enough that he continued to invite her to his cabin. He couldn't deny that. It drove him wild the way that she would go stiff and start quivering in reaction to his provocations. The desire she stirred in him was unlike anything he had ever experienced. He was embarrassed to be so swept up by it, but he couldn't help it.

“Um... Your Grace?”

He looked up and saw that his assistant had opened the car door and was waiting for him.

He took a deep breath and stepped out of the car. The directors of his company had come out of the building to greet him.

Before passing through the huge columns flanking the building's entrance, he looked over his shoulder at the sunny street behind him. He knew that it was highly unlikely he would see Layla walking down that street, but he couldn't pass up the off chance that he might see her smiling face again.

After confirming she was nowhere to be seen, he chuckled at himself, then walked into the building with a polite smile on his face.

* * *

One day, Bill left Arvis to go on a trip. Carrying a large suitcase, he looked like a soldier heading off to the battlefield.

Layla accompanied him all the way to the end of Platanus Road to say goodbye. Not just Bill, but several of his helpers were going on the trip together, so the normally quiet road was full of lively conversation.

By now, the greenhouse's glass walls had been repaired, but most of the plants inside had already died from exposure to the cold winter air. Since many of the plants were exotic and extremely rare, replacing them wasn't an easy task. However, this task was Bill's duty to complete.

Layla worried that he was working too much, but he had told her that working long hours every day was the only way to assuage his guilt. She could tell from the look on his face that this was true.

“It's cold, Layla! You should go back to the cottage!” he shouted.

Layla nodded but didn't turn around right away. Bill and his companions were heading off to visit the empire's most famous horticulturists and botanical gardens, as well as various aristocrats' greenhouses. The trip would likely take a few weeks. Layla hated the thought of being left alone at Arvis for all that time. She would have rather accompanied Uncle Bill on the trip, although she hadn't told him this, knowing how strange it would have sounded.

The group of men departed, leaving Layla alone on the road. She stared blankly for a while, before being roused from her daze by the sound of a car approaching. Not wanting to see the duke, she quickly turned around and started walking, but the car naturally outpaced her.

As the black car passed by her, she stopped and waited with her hands clasped together and her head turned away from the road.

*It's not a big deal,* she desperately told herself to calm her anxious heart. *Uncle Bill's absence has nothing to do with the duke.*

Once the car was out of sight, she hurried back to the cottage. After doing some housecleaning and ironing, she felt more relaxed.

Simple chores like that had become a big comfort in her life lately. Doing mundane tasks as she went about her daily life enabled her to forget about the duke.

*Maybe he'll be done with me before his wedding,* she thought one day when she saw Claudine and Matthias together. Standing next to each other, they looked like the perfect couple. Even from a distance, she could tell that the duke cherished Claudine and cared about her deeply. After watching them for a moment, she took a circuitous route back to the cottage, so that they wouldn't catch sight of her. The weather was very cold, and her cheeks stayed red long after she had come inside.

Just as she was about to sit down at the desk in her room, Phoebe appeared at her window with a note from the duke. It was much earlier than usual, but he was requesting her presence at once.

She tore up the note and put the pieces into the heater, then quickly fed the animals, locked up, and left. As she walked to the cabin at a moderate pace, she imagined the life she would live once she was free from the duke. This had become something of a habit for her.

*I want to go with Uncle Bill to some distant city,* she thought. *Somewhere in the south would be nice, near the Lovita border. Sometimes we can go on a trip to look for birds that live on tropical islands, or in arctic countries. And Uncle Bill and I can get a house where we can cultivate a nice little flowerbed, and...*

As she was trying to continue down this line of thought, she turned onto the path leading to the cabin. The sun was just starting to set, and the scenery around the river looked beautiful. She tried to focus only on that.

*If this arrangement with the duke is temporary, the suffering isn't a big deal. After all, I've been learning to endure all sorts of suffering since I was young.*

After building up her confidence with this thought, she strode towards the cabin, her long, slender shadow trailing behind her.

* * *

Other than the fact that the sun still hadn’t set, the cabin bedroom looked the same as always: the large bed, the blazing fireplace, the elegant furniture and decor, and the naked woman.

Matthias glanced briefly at her petite body, which by now felt like a part of the room to him, then returned his gaze to the stack of papers on his lap.

The Herhardt family company had long since grown too large to be managed only by members of the family. His grandfather and father had thus worked tirelessly to structure the company with a board of directors that handled many of what had previously been the CEO's duties. By now that structure was firmly established and functioned well. Matthias's role as head of the company was therefore largely a matter of overseeing the work of these directors and making large-scale decisions. He had already grown proficient in this role when he was still a child, but it was a turbulent era, and the world was changing rapidly.

He carefully perused the documents on his lap, which mostly had to do with international mines and oilfields. Occasionally he looked up and glanced at the naked body of the woman sitting on the bed, before returning his focus to his work. Instead of the usual moans and cries, the bedroom was filled only with the peaceful sounds of pages turning and the crackling of the fire.

Layla, who was staring at her feet, only looked up after the sun had finished setting. Instead of walking straight to her and reveling in his lust right away like usual, for some reason this evening he was treating her like she was invisible.

She swallowed uneasily, then lifted her arms to cover her breasts, which were covered with goosebumps. She glanced at the duke through the corner of her eye. He was still sitting in the same chair by the fireplace, reading the same stack of papers. He had followed her into the bedroom and watched her undress, but that was it. He had been absorbed in his own work for a surprisingly long amount of time.

Just as he jotted something down and set down the stack of documents, the two of them made eye contact. She immediately hunched her shoulders and lowered her head. When he finally stood up, she actually felt relieved. As unpleasant as it was going to be, the sooner they got it over with the sooner she could leave.

However, he proceeded to walk not towards her, but towards the bedroom door. She watched in bewilderment as he left the room. Through the half-open door, she then heard the sound of him talking to someone on the phone. It seemed to be a work-related phone call.

After delivering a few polite but firm instructions, he hung up and returned to the bedroom. For a moment she forgot to lower her head, so they made eye contact again, but he didn't show much of a reaction. He simply gazed at her for a moment as if he were appreciating a piece of art, then casually went back to the same chair he had been sitting in before.

After extending his long legs and resting his feet on the ottoman, he took yet another stack of documents from a small table next to the chair. Along with the sound of pages turning, the faint melody of a waltz could be heard coming from the other room. When she realized the music was coming from the phonograph in the drawing room, she grew concerned.

*What's going on...?* Frowning, she took her glasses from the bedside table and put them on.

The duke, who was twirling a pen between his fingers, was no longer reading the documents on his lap. He was now looking at her.

Even with her glasses on, she couldn't read the expression on his face. All that her glasses did was make her more aware of the situation she was in. Suddenly she felt extremely embarrassed.

With the stack of documents on his lap, Matthias cocked his head slightly as he continued to look at her.

Feeling very flustered and starting to blush, she hurriedly found her undergarments and put them on. Then she proceeded to put on

the rest of her clothing, glancing over at him occasionally as she did so. With each item of clothing she put back on, her cheeks grew redder.

For some reason, she felt far more embarrassed now with her clothes back on than she had while sitting on the bed naked for all that time.

As Matthias tapped his finger on the stack of documents, following the rhythm of the waltz, she stood up from the bed.

Her lips quivered as if she was going to say something, then she lowered her head. With her gaze averted, she almost said something again, then finally lifted her head and looked straight at him. He stopped twirling the pen and returned her gaze.

As she stood in the moonlight that was coming through the half-curtained window, she asked in a shaky yet confident tone, “What the hell are you doing?”

# Chapter 73:
## The Canary's Song

"Sit," Matthias calmly said.

Layla frowned at him. "This wasn't part of the deal."

The easy chairs in the cabin's drawing room had been moved aside and replaced with a dining table on which food had been laid out for them. She had nothing but bad memories from this room.

"You said you were doing your part," he countered.

"Yes, I am."

"You're too skinny. It's no fun. It hurts," he said, looking her up and down.

Her eyes widened. She was aghast at the large gap between the crudeness of his comment and the indifferent tone in which he had made it. *How does he see me, that he could say something so insulting?* she wondered, glaring at him as if he had just slapped her face.

He merely grinned at her and gracefully poured wine into his glass. "Unless you're trying to starve to death, sit down and eat.

"…"

"Are you trying to die?"

"…"

"Fine, suit yourself. If you want to die, then I'll make a gravestone for you. Let's see, what should it say...?" He lowered his eyes as he placed his napkin on his lap. "How about, 'Here lies Duke Herhardt's mistress'? What do you think?"

"What?"

"Don't worry, it will be an ornate marble gravestone, large enough for everyone to see." The flat tone with which he made this sarcastic comment made it sting even more.

She lowered her head to stifle her anger. However, this proved not to be effective, because the carpet immediately brought more unpleasant memories to her mind. At that point, she realized that while her wounds would heal with time, the bigger the wound, the

bigger the scar it would leave after healing. Even if she was eventually able to brush herself off and move on from this situation, the scar that it would leave deep inside her would never go away.

She glared at him, clenching her fists. He looked very relaxed as he slowly ate his meal.

“I'm not going to die,” she shouted as she sat down across from him.

*I'm not going to let him enjoy seeing me get flustered and cower from him,* she resolved. This gave her a renewed feeling of courage. Or perhaps it was despair. Either way, she wasn't going to remain passive when he tried to dominate her, even if she couldn't stop him from getting his way in the end.

“I'm not going to die, or let my life be ruined, because of someone like you,” she said, grabbing a dinner roll and tearing a large bite off of it. “I'm going to live a long, happy life.” She spread a thick coating of butter on the remainder of the roll before taking another bite. Her lips were now covered with crumbs, but she didn't care. If seeing her eat like a pig made him want to get rid of her sooner, so much the better.

“Oh really?” he calmly asked, setting down his fork and knife. “Good for you,” he said in a patronizing tone as he poured wine into her glass.

Without wiping the crumbs and butter from her hands, she grabbed the glass and started gulping down the wine.

“Oh my,” he said as he watched her empty the glass in a matter of seconds. He quickly poured more wine for her.

As if to demonstrate that she wasn't going to be the perfect lady that he wanted her to be, she downed that glass as well. She was doing a very good job of acting in an undignified manner.

She wiped her hand across her lips, then took her fork and started stuffing her mouth with food. He smirked as he watched her. He didn't mind the sight. He would rather see this barbarous behavior than have her wasting away to skin and bones.

* * *

“Turn off the music,” Layla suddenly said, glaring at the phonograph after finishing about a bottle's worth of wine.

“Keep listening,” Matthias replied. “It's beautiful.”

The pianist in the recording had just begun the most technically brilliant section of the waltz. It was the canary's favorite melody. Layla listened for a moment longer with an underwhelmed look on her face, then frowned and muttered, “I hate it.” She then skewered the last piece of meat with her fork and crammed it into her mouth.

Watching her chew, he laughed. “Your taste is worse than that of a bird.”

“A bird...?” she asked after washing down the meat with the rest of her wine. Her cheeks were flushed bright red.

He chuckled but made no reply. She stared at him for a while, before losing interest and looking down at her empty plate. All the frantic eating and drinking seemed to have sapped her of her energy. In a meek voice, she asked, “When are you going to get rid of me?”

He set down his glass and looked at her. He could tell from the calm look in her eyes that she wasn't whining or playing around.

“You've had me, so at some point you're going to get rid of me, right?” she asked.

“Sure,” he calmly replied. He knew he could only keep a mistress for so long. He would have had to be much more sentimental and foolish to think otherwise.

“Then hurry up and get rid of me.”

“What will you do then?”

“I'll start living a good life.” She wiped her mouth and hands with her napkin. “A good life that has absolutely nothing to do with you, Your Grace.”

“You don't think you can live a good life around me?”

“No,” she replied without hesitating, “of course I can't.” She set the crumpled napkin on the table and looked down at her hands.

Her eyelashes were light in color, but the shadows they cast on

her face were dark.

He leaned back in his chair, gazing at her. It wasn't an especially offensive or unpleasant response. Their affair couldn't last forever, so naturally it would have to come to an end at some point. No matter how passionate his desire for her was now, it would surely die down eventually. When that happened, it would be for the best if she simply packed up and left, and it would be all the better for her if she could live a good life after that.

*Then why do I feel this way?* he wondered, furrowing his brow. For some reason, her response was grating at him.

Just then, she rose from her seat.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm leaving," she casually replied.

A twisted grin appeared on his face. He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him.

"Ow!"

He ignored her cry of pain. Holding her against his chest as she struggled to get free, he lay down on the sofa. Before long, she stopped struggling, realizing it was no use.

He tightened his grip on her as she lay on top of him. He buried his face in the nape of her neck and smelled the familiar scent of her body. It was a soft, sweet smell.

He extended his tongue and touched it against a spot on her neck where he could see her pulse. She flinched at once. This amused him, so he proceeded to lick all over her neck, her chin, and her cute ears. Whenever she squirmed to try to avoid him, it made her soft hair tremble, producing a faint swishing sound.

*It must be really late by now,* she thought, trying to guess the time as she looked out the window. However, the alcohol in her system was making it hard to sense how much time had passed.

His hand went inside her blouse. She expected the usual unpleasant feeling, but this time the touch of his warm hand felt different. It slowly swept over her belly and back before gently clutching one of her breasts.

With her eyes shut, she hated the feeling of his hand, so she half-opened her eyes and looked down. She could see the movements of his hand underneath the thin fabric of her blouse. It looked very strange, so she shut her eyes again. As soon as she did, she was overwhelmed by the equally strange sound of him licking and sucking on her earlobe.

She prayed that it would end quickly, but the moment seemed to last for ages. Just like the slow melody of the annoying music, his hand slowly moved towards her lips and started to fondle them. It didn't hurt as much as it had before, perhaps because she was so full of food and wine.

Just as he started to lift her skirt, she shouted, “T-turn off the music! It's giving me a headache!”

“The music is beautiful, Layla,” he replied, pulling her skirt above her knees. “You have a headache because you were guzzling wine like a street urchin.”

His snide comment angered her, but she didn't respond.

His hand crept underneath her undergarments and started feeling her. Startled, she tried to push him away. When that proved impossible, she put her hands over her mouth instead. However, he had no trouble pulling her hands away from her mouth, which only increased her shame.

Without wanting to, she started to moan and pant, loudly enough that even the music didn't cover up the sound. Soon her body started to convulse, and then went limp. Only then did he take his hand out from under her skirt.

“You claim not to be able to live a good life near me, but your moans tell a different story, as does this,” he said, showing her his wet, glistening fingers. He then extended his hand towards her face and placed against it her cheek.

She shuddered and tried to push his hand away, but that only made him tighten his grip. As she caught her breath and he snickered, their eyes met.

“Now that we've done what I wanted, let's do something you

want," he said. He swiftly laid her on the sofa and got on top of her.

"All I want is to get away from you as soon as possible," she replied.

"You're lying." He slowly caressed her lips with his wet fingers. Then he started unbuttoning her blouse.

She glared at him with eyes full of a mixture of shame and anger. "Why didn't you just do this from the start?" she asked, disappointed that he wasn't letting her leave.

"That's no fun anymore," he replied. After unbuttoning the last button, he removed her blouse, and then took off her skirt as well. "This way I can see you suffer. I enjoy it when you suffer." Laughing, he took her glasses off her face and started kissing her wet cheeks.

The kiss was as soft as two birds rubbing their beaks together, but she didn't have the mental strength left to notice. All that she could feel was pain—a pain deep inside, brought about by her shame.

# Chapter 74:
## I'll Come Get You

Though they had started in the drawing room, on the sofa, they finished in the bedroom, on the bed. Layla was so exhausted, she could do nothing but breathe. She had failed to anticipate what the duke was going to do to her.

"…!"

When she realized that her wrists were tied together, her eyes popped open with a start. Too tired to scream, all she could do was glare at him. Smiling languidly back at her, he took the necktie with which he had tied her wrists and tied the other end to one of the bedposts.

"Untie m-me! Untie me r-right now!" she stammered, flailing about.

He gently patted her head and said, "Stay still, Layla." He pushed the necktie downward on the bedpost so that she could lie more comfortably. "If you move, the knot will only get tighter." He lifted one of the pillows strewn across the floor and placed it under her head. He also pulled the blanket up to cover her body, but she immediately thrashed about, causing it to fall to the floor. He frowned for a moment, then smiled again. He knew that it was no use picking up the blanket, since she would probably do the same thing. Since there was a fire in the fireplace, he figured she would be fine for a little while without a blanket.

Sweeping back the sweaty hair that was stuck to his cheeks and neck, he headed to the bathroom. He would have liked to take a two-person shower with her, but there was no way she would have agreed to that. At least he knew she wouldn't be able to escape while he was in the shower.

After a long shower, he soaked a washcloth in hot water and brought it back to the bedroom, where she was sprawled out on top of the thoroughly wrinkled sheets. Apparently she had been

thrashing around even more while he was gone. The pillow he had put under her head was back on the floor.

Furrowing his brow, he untied the necktie from her wrists. When he saw the bright-red marks it had left on her skin, he let out a long sigh. “I told you it would hurt if you moved.”

“You're a psycho,” she muttered as he gently rubbed her wrists. She didn't like that he was touching her, but she lacked the energy to lift a finger. In that moment, her body didn't feel like it was her own. She closed her eyes and helplessly let the duke continue to touch her.

He sat on the side of the bed and with the warm washcloth he began to gently, slowly wipe off the white stains that had dried onto various spots on her body.

His hand passed from her cheeks, to her breasts, down to her lower belly. At that point, she let out a whimpering sigh and labored to open her eyes.

Their eyes met. His contained a serene but indifferent look. His expression was so cold, she couldn't believe he was the same man who had been inside her just a short while before. The same went for his touch as he wiped her body. There was no trace of lust left in his touch. Somehow this made her feel even more embarrassed.

He was mysterious to her in many ways, but she understood this about him least of all. It was as if he had a switch in his head that turned him into a completely different person depending on whether it was up or down.

She closed her eyes again. Now that her breathing had settled down, her body lying on the bed resembled a marble statue.

Matthias went and got one of his robes and wrapped her naked body in it, then embraced her. She flinched at first but made no further resistance.

Holding her in his arms, he resumed his examination of the documents he had been perusing earlier in the day.

Suddenly, he heard her mutter, “I hate you.” He had thought she was asleep, but apparently, she wasn't.

He set down the documents and looked at her. A drop of water dripped from his undried hair onto her pale cheek. He wiped it off for her.

"I... hate you so much," she whispered, mustering what little strength she had.

She had never hated anyone in her life. Not the mother who had abandoned her, not the relatives who had beaten her, not even Mrs. Ettman, who had done so much to humiliate her. It wasn't that they weren't deserving of her hatred. It was just that hating them would have weighed her down too much.

She had always striven to empty herself of all hatred, so that she could fly through life as light as a bird. Not having the strength to plod through life weighed down by hate, she had instead decided not to hate anyone.

However, when it came to this man, Matthias von Herhardt, she couldn't help but hate him. Even though her hatred for him felt as heavy as a boulder and made it hard to take even a single step in life, she had neither the desire nor the capacity to stop hating him.

*I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.* She continued to whisper this until she finally drifted off to sleep.

Matthias chuckled quietly. After gazing at her for a while longer, he shifted his gaze back to the documents in his hand. Meanwhile, she slept deeply on his lap, embraced by the warmth of his body.

*If you want to live well, you should beg me not to get rid of you, Layla.*

Suddenly the unpleasant feeling returned to him, and he let out a dejected sigh. Without realizing it, he wrapped his arm more snugly around her.

He had countless things to give to his beautiful mistress. He could give her a good house and a comfortable life. If she wanted, he could send her off to college. She could spend the rest of her life studying birds. There were so many things he could give her that the doctor's son she used to love could never provide. And yet she had said that she couldn't live a good life without getting away

from him...

He gently caressed her lips. They felt soft and warm, unlike the mean-spirited things they had just been uttering.

As a feeling of contentment spread through him, he immersed himself in his work again. Her soft, regular breaths were music to his ears. He relished her warmth, her scent, and the slight movements she made as she slept. He liked everything about the woman he was holding in his arms. He had a feeling that his desire for her might last longer than he had thought, but this didn't bother him.

He set aside the final document and looked up. Outside the window, snowflakes were fluttering down. As he watched the snow falling above the icy river, he was reminded of the first snowfall earlier that winter. It was the night of the benefit performance with the ridiculous children's play. The night when he had talked to Layla under the streetlamp in the park.

*"It's snowing..."* she had quietly exclaimed, lifting her head.

He didn't know why she was so excited to see snow, when it fell every winter, but she had been smiling delightedly. In his mind he could still vividly see those white snowflakes landing on her long eyelashes.

"Layla," he said in a voice as serene as the snow falling outside.

She stirred slightly but didn't open her eyes. Her stirring caused her robe to slip down below her waist.

He was sure that if she saw the snow, she would smile just as brightly as she had the last time. He thought about shaking her to wake her up, but then he changed his mind and just softly placed his hand on her cheek. She nuzzled into the warmth of his palm. It was a very slight movement, but he could feel it.

He decided not to fix her robe. When her bare shoulder started to quiver, she pulled herself tighter against his body. He found himself holding his breath, not wanting to rouse her from her slumber.

He felt something fluttering deep inside him, something soft and delicate like the snowflakes outside. It wasn't mere lust. It was a

strange, unfamiliar feeling, a feeling that he wanted to keep gazing at the woman in his arms forever.

He hugged her small, half-naked body tighter. Spurred by his hand's warmth as he started to slowly caress her bare back, she buried herself deeper in his embrace.

Interlocking his arms around her, he leaned further back into the chair. As his blue eyes watched the snowy scene outside, his eyelids slowly closed, and he lowered his head to kiss her face.

*Layla.* His breath was slow and warm as he silently whispered her name. *Layla. Layla. Layla.*

* * *

The night train from the capital arrived at Karlsbar Central Station. The sun hadn't yet risen on this winter morning, so the platform was suffused with twilight.

Having just awoken, the passengers were bleary-eyed, but they hurried to get off the train. Soon the platform was crowded with people lugging heavy suitcases.

Just as the commotion was starting to die down, Kyle stepped off the train. It was an unannounced visit home, so there was no one there to pick him up. His parents believed him to be on an international train headed to the southern part of the continent. Indeed, Kyle himself had thought that was where he would be headed, until he set foot in Ratse Central Station and changed his mind.

After he had gathered all his courage to send the last letter to Layla, she still hadn't responded. This was a sign that it was time to let go. At least, that's how he took it at first. That's why he had followed his father's advice and decided to broaden his horizons by going on a trip.

And yet, he had suddenly changed his mind and boarded a train headed to Karlsbar instead.

He pondered over the reason for his sudden change of heart throughout the whole train ride but couldn't come up with a good

answer.

All he knew is he had a hunch. It was an ominous hunch, based on the fact that it was not like the Layla he knew to completely cut off all communication with him. He worried that something had happened to her. He was well aware that he could wrong, that she might be fine and his mind might be playing tricks on him. But even if this was the case, he knew that he needed to see her with his own two eyes. That was all he wanted.

Carrying a large trunk, he plodded across the platform, from which the rest of the crowd was already gone. Unlike the previous summer when he had looked so gaunt and haggard, he now looked like a healthy young man, full of life.

He exited the station and saw the square covered in snow. His head and shoulders were soon coated with white powder as the flakes continued their slow, silent dance.

“Layla...” he whispered, the name turning into white steam as it left his mouth. He felt a dull ache in the pit of his stomach, and his heart started to increase its pace. Lifting his heavy trunk, he strode across the snowy square.

*I will cherish you. You will be the whole world to me. I won't let you get hurt, Layla.*

These words from the last letter he had sent expressed his deepest feelings. All she had to do was give him the slightest nod, and he was ready to keep his promise.

*I'll come get you. Let's go to a place where we can be happy together.*

# Chapter 75:
## The Right Choice

Matthias was awoken by the sound of his canary singing. The bird seemed to be in a good mood—its song was lively, and it was hopping about within its cage as it sang.

Still half-asleep, Matthias gazed at the bird for a long while.

After finishing its song, the canary hopped into the water dish on the floor of its cage. First it dipped its head into the water and shook it dry several times, then it rapidly flapped its wings, wetting its whole body.

Matthias chuckled and sat up in bed, still watching the bird. After finishing its bath, it jumped up onto its perch and shook the remaining droplets off its feathers. With its wings outspread, it then proceeded to preen itself diligently.

*They're quite similar in their attention to small details,* he thought, comparing the canary to Layla in his mind.

As the bird settled back into its nest, Matthias got out of bed. He rang the bell for the butler, and soon Hessen appeared with the morning newspaper and a cup of coffee. He then calmly reported on the state of the preparations for the crown prince and princess's visit, as well as the guest list for an upcoming party.

“Lady Claudine will be arriving at Arvis this afternoon.”

“I see.”

“Marquess Lindman will be arriving tomorrow afternoon. I have already sent your apologies for the fact that you will be away from Arvis for several days and so will not be able to greet them when they arrive.”

Matthias set down the newspaper and lifted his coffee cup, nodding to indicate that he was listening. Matthias, Riette, and the crown prince were all the same age, and had been part of the same social circles all their lives, so it was only natural that they had become close. Claudine was also one of the crown princess's closest

friends, so they had decided to spend time together at Arvis while the crown prince and princess were in town.

“You'll need to depart at about ten o'clock this morning to catch the train. Is that all right, Your Grace?”

“Yes, that's fine,” Matthias replied, nodding politely.

Hessen lowered his head and took a step back to make room for his master to pass by.

Matthias had to spend a few days in the capital for business. In order to make it back to Arvis in time for the visit of the crown prince and princess, his trip was going to have to be quite rushed. He showered and got dressed. His facial expression and movements looked the same as usual.

News of Kyle Ettman's return to Karlsbar spread through Arvis in less than a day. Soon it was on everyone's lips. It would have been impossible not to hear about it. And sure enough, Matthias heard about it soon as well.

*Kyle Ettman... Kyle Ettman...* After mulling over the name for a moment, he snickered. Whatever reason Kyle had for canceling his travel plans and returning to his hometown instead, it wasn't of Matthias's concern. This was true even if Kyle still had feelings for Layla, and she for him. Since Layla was Matthias's mistress, she wouldn't be able to receive Kyle's affection. It was that simple.

There was a calm smile on his face as he fastened his cufflinks. He liked Layla's fastidious temperament. At times he had wondered if he had made a mistake in laying claim to her in the way he had, but not any longer. He was now certain it was the right choice.

Firm in this conviction, he stepped out of his dressing room. He was quite confident that he would never have to worry about Kyle Ettman again.

* * *

“It must be because of Layla, right? Do you think the two of them are back together?”

Several maids were gathered in the staff drawing room. Even

though they were up to their necks in work preparing for the crown prince and prince's impending visit, everyone was gossiping about Kyle and Layla.

“I haven't heard anything about them reuniting. For all we know, there's some other reason for his return.”

“The Ettman family said that he would be spending this whole winter break traveling in the southern part of the continent. So, what reason could there be for him suddenly changing his plans and coming back to Karlsbar, unless it was to see Layla?”

“You've got a point there. They were inseparable for all those years. Connections like that aren't easily severed.”

“Exactly! They've known each other since they were kids. It's a match made in heaven...”

After chatting excitedly about this for a while, they ended up sighing in sympathy for the couple. Most of Arvis's staff had watched Layla and Kyle grow up together. They weren't simply gossiping about them for fun; they truly cared about them.

“Ugh, I should go check on Layla to see how she's doing,” Chef Mona muttered with a sigh. She wasn't the type to let this sort of thing slip by—she was as goodhearted as she was nosy, and she was as good at cooking as she was at chatting. “With Mr. Remmer out of town, she's got to be lonely. I won't be able to stop worrying until I bring her some food and see her face.”

* * *

“Layla! Layla, are you home?”

Chef Mona's loud voice rang out through the cottage's front yard.

“Layla!”

Layla, who had been sitting at her desk in a daze, pulled herself together quickly upon hearing Mona's cries. Before she could recover from her embarrassment, she heard Mona's booming voice again.

“Yes! I'm coming out, Chef Mona!” she quickly replied. She frantically tried to neaten her clothes and hair to make herself look

presentable, then rushed out the front door to greet Mona.

Once the two of them walked inside and put the tea kettle on the stove, Layla finally felt like herself again.

“Are you feeling sick, Layla? Your face doesn't look so good,” Mona asked.

Knowing that it would only make Mona more suspicious if she tried to make up an excuse, Layla nodded. “I'm tired. I haven't been getting enough sleep.”

“You haven't been getting enough sleep? Oh, Layla. I guess you've been staying up all night studying,” Mona replied in a confident tone.

Layla laughed awkwardly and fixed her glasses, then placed a cup of tea in front of Mona. Mona took a fruitcake out of the basket she had brought and cut a large slice for Layla. “I know you love to study, but your health is important too, Layla. If Bill saw how tired and haggard you look right now, it would break his heart! Speaking of whom, did I hear that he still won't be back for a while?”

“I got a letter from him yesterday. He said it will be another couple of weeks.”

“I can believe it. There were so many exotic plants in that greenhouse, it's got to be hard tracking down replacements for them all. It must be so hard for Bill. Still, though, it's a small price to pay for not having to go to prison, not to mention being allowed to continue to work here at Arvis.”

“Well... sure. Yes, it is.”

“We're so lucky to have Duke Herhardt in charge of us. I don't think any other nobleman in the empire would have shown such kindness.”

As Mona continued to praise the duke for a long while, Layla patiently listened, chewing on a bite of the cake despite barely being able to taste it. Mona then started talking about the crown prince and princess's visit the following week, and the preparations for the magnificent party that was planned for them. Layla continued listening politely, but she wasn't particularly interested in

the social life of royals and nobles.

“Oh, by the way, I heard that Kyle is back in Karlsbar. Did you... happen to hear about that?” Mona asked, finally getting to the real reason for her visit.

Compared to the previous subject, this question actually made Layla feel more at ease. “Yes, I heard.”

“I see. Well, everyone's talking about it, so I guess it would've been hard not to hear about it. Have you seen him?”

“No,” Layla replied, smiling blandly as she fiddled with the handle of her teacup.

Mona looked at Layla's ashen face with pity, until she couldn't help but say more. “If I were you, Layla, I'd run off somewhere with Kyle. I know Mrs. Ettman wouldn't be happy about it, but that boy has said he can't stand to live without you.”

“Kyle and I don't have that sort of relationship anymore, Chef Mona.”

“Sure, I know that. But Layla, if Kyle really came back to Karlsbar just because you're here, maybe you should give your relationship another shot. If it were any another guy, I'd say forget about him. But Kyle... he's different from other guys.” Mona felt like she wasn't expressing herself well, but ultimately she realized that Kyle was just hard to explain. “You know, Bill and I have talked about this plenty of times. About whether you and Kyle breaking up was really the right choice.”

Mona looked like she had more to say, but Layla only smiled in silence—there was nothing she could say. As a different man's mistress, what could she possibly say about Kyle? This thought pained her heart deeply. As the pain settled inside her, it turned into even more hatred for Matthias von Herhardt.

“Well, look at the time,” Mona said, once it seemed like Layla wasn't going to say anything more. “I've got to get going. Sorry for blathering on for so long. Miss Claudine is coming today, so I've been very busy with preparations. Apparently, she'll be staying at Arvis through the duration of the crown prince and princess's visit

next week. She spends so much time here, I have no idea why they delayed the wedding." With that, Mona got up to leave.

Layla followed her out to the front yard to say goodbye. The moment she had heard Claudine's name, her mouth had gone dry. To hide that, she was trying to smile as brightly as possible as she waved goodbye.

Finally, Mona left, and silence was restored to the cottage and the snowy forest behind it.

Layla went back into the kitchen and started slowly eating the fruitcake again. She still could barely taste it, but she knew she had to eat something. She didn't want to worry Uncle Bill. Moreover, she hated the thought that she had grown gaunt because of the duke.

*Who does he think he is?*

She gulped down the rest of the lukewarm tea, then put a little more of the food Mona had brought over onto a large plate. After chewing and swallowing it, she put some more on the plate, until she could see the bottom of the basket Mona had brought. When she suddenly recalled the crude thing the duke had said about her skinny body, she struggled to keep the food down, but she managed.

She did her best to have an ordinary, mundane day. Noticing there was a book open on the desk in her room that she hadn't read in a long time, she finally closed it, and then cleaned the rest of her room. While she was at it, she did the laundry as well. After finishing these chores, she felt a little better.

The duke wouldn't be back from the capital until the weekend at the earliest. It made her sad how much relief she was feeling at the thought of just a few days free of him. She often wondered when it would end. Eventually she grew restless and left the cottage.

It was quite cold out, but it felt great to get on her bicycle and start riding at a fast pace. She went to the library and returned the book, then stopped by the general store to buy some powdered soap and a cleaning brush. She then bought and drank a sickeningly

sweet cup of hot chocolate and started back home with a bright smile on her face.

The smile remained on her face until she turned onto the road leading to Arvis, at which point she saw a face she had been missing with so much intensity that she hadn't actually wanted to see it. In the silence after she brought her bicycle to a stop, she heard a quiet, warm voice.

“Layla...”

It was Kyle.

# Chapter 76:
## Point of No Return

“I heard about what happened to Bill,” Kyle said, breaking the long silence.

“Yeah,” Layla replied, still looking at the table.

He looked closer at her. Since they had entered the café and sat down across from each other, she had not looked at him once.

“I'm sorry, Layla.”

“What...?” she asked, finally looking up. “Why are you sorry?”

Beyond her glasses, he could see the doubt in her eyes. This gave him a feeling of relief. He finally felt like he was looking at the Layla he knew.

“Because I didn't do anything to help. I just kept sending those stupid letters, totally ignorant of the trouble Bill was in.”

“No, Kyle. Don't talk like that. You didn't do anything wrong. It had nothing to do with you. It was just between Uncle Bill and me,” she replied, shaking her head slowly and firmly. “It was just an unfortunate accident. And... it's all better now.”

“It's all better now? Really?”

“Yeah,” she replied, lowering her eyes again. She had been pulling at the sleeves of her sweater since they sat down. By now, her hands were completely hidden inside them.

“If something's the matter, you should just tell me, Layla. I'll help. I'll do whatever I can to help.”

“Why do you keep saying things like that?”

“Because you don't look okay at all,” he said in an emphatic tone.

She let go of her sleeves and, taking a deep breath, put her hands under the table.

“Do you think I don't know you, Layla?” he asked. By now, he was certain that the ominous hunch he had felt was correct. He had sensed that something was off about Layla when she wouldn't respond to his letters, and now that he saw her in person, she

seemed even less like herself. He knew that Bill loved her with all his heart, but he also knew that Bill probably wasn't discerning enough to notice that there was something bothering her that she wasn't talking about.

Kyle knew that she was far too adept at hiding her feelings. She never asked for help when she was having a hard time. Ever since he had first realized this, he had made sure to observe her with extra care. The more she smiled, the closer he looked for hidden signs of distress. Of course, she was better at hiding her feelings than he was at detecting them, but nonetheless, he was usually able to sense when something wasn't right with her. And he sensed that right now. “Come on, Layla. I sent you letter after letter for months and you didn't answer a single one. That's not like you. And neither is the way you're acting towards me right now.”

“People change, Kyle.” She slowly closed her eyes, then opened them and faced him with a cold look. “Just because I seem different from before doesn't mean that I'm not acting like myself. I am acting like myself. This is what I'm like now.”

“You're telling me that over the course of a couple of seasons, you changed into a completely different person?”

“I don't think two seasons is such a short amount of time. And anyway, you and I don't have the same relationship we used to.”

“Layla!”

“And not sending you any letters in response *was* my response. We're done, Kyle. We can never go back to the way things were before. Never.” Looking straight into his eyes, she continued in a decisive tone of voice. “I don't like you anymore, Kyle. Even if your mom suddenly approved of our relationship, I wouldn't want it. So, all your talk about running away together and getting married? I wouldn't consider it for a moment.” She stood up, leaving him sitting in a daze at the table. “I didn't want to tell you this, Kyle. I wanted our friendship to remain a happy memory. That's why I didn't respond to your letters... But I guess this is what happened as a result.”

“You're lying, Layla. How could you...”

“I've just given you the only response I can. If you still care about me at all, then let's not meet again. I don't even like to hear people mention our names together. So please do me that favor.”

He couldn't respond. He felt like he was in a bad dream. She gathered her things and left the café. He only snapped out of his daze as the bell attached to the café's door rang. “Wait! Layla!” he shouted, running outside and grabbing her shoulders just as she was about to get onto her bicycle.

As she turned to look back at him, her eyes were red and full of tears. He felt like he was looking at a cracked window that was on the verge of shattering to pieces. Not wanting to push her any further, he remained silent.

She shook his hands off her shoulders, quickly got onto her bicycle, and rode away. He stood in place, staring blankly long after she was out of sight.

He was certain that something was the matter. He was going to find out what it was and help her.

* * *

“Wow, it's truly a mess, isn't it?” Riette remarked with amusement as he looked at the greenhouse, which was under repair. Claudine glared at him, but he just chuckled.

“I can't believe you're laughing in the face of this tragedy,” she said. “I didn't know you were so coldhearted.”

“I'm just in shock,” he replied. “Who knew that Arvis's heaven could be reduced to this in one morning.” He looked all around. On his last visit, the greenhouse had been a flawlessly beautiful paradise. Now it had been reduced to a wasteland. The frozen plants had been dug up, making the flowerbeds look like bombs had been dropped on them. “I can't believe they dropped the charges against the gardener and let him keep working here after he did all this. I guess that's why the duke is so widely respected throughout the empire.”

“He must be very happy with his mistress.”

Riette's eyes widened. “Lady Claudine, I'm surprised to hear you say such a thing.”

She bit her lip for a moment, then the calm expression returned to her face. “Sorry, Riette. Must have been a slip of the tongue.”

“No need to apologize. I like it. It's nice seeing you jealous for a change.”

“Jealous? Ha...” she replied, shaking her head. She walked ahead of him out of the greenhouse.

She had brought Riette to the greenhouse right after he arrived at Arvis in order to elicit sympathy from him. And perhaps to flirt with him. Of course, she knew he would do nothing but make snide comments. Yet, somehow, his flippant attitude brought her comfort.

They headed to the drawing room, where tea had been prepared. The whole family was there, other than Duke Herhardt. There was a lively, convivial atmosphere.

Claudine and Riette sat in their designated spots and expertly played their designated roles—the duke's fiancée, and his cousin and lifelong friend.

Whenever their eyes happened to meet across the table, she wondered what it would have been like if her parents had decided she should marry him, rather than the duke. But even as she wondered this, she knew that they had made the right decision in setting up their only daughter to become Duchess Herhardt, rather than Marchioness Lindman.

The world was changing at an ever-increasing rate. These changes would likely be especially severe for the aristocracy, which in many ways stood as a symbol of a bygone age. The wealthy, prominent Brandt family was more aware of these trends than anyone. And not just the parents, but Claudine as well. Because she was born a daughter rather than a son, she hadn't received the education that an heir would have received, but she still had the family's inherent good sense and had picked up vast amounts of knowledge through living in society.

This was why it had to be the Herhardt family that she married into. Many illustrious families would likely get swept away by the shifting tides of history and disappear, but the Herhardt family would surely endure and find glory in the new era. The future she wanted for herself lay in the Herhardt name. A future of ever-continuing glory, not an outmoded family that would sink into obscurity.

Eventually, the conversation shifted to the wedding that was coming up in the summer.

"The greenhouse should be fully restored before your wedding, Claudine."

Claudine lowered her eyes in modesty as all the noblewomen at the table smiled at her. After a short while, she lifted her head again and saw Riette's gentle brown eyes. She liked the playful, warm look in them. She had liked those eyes since she and he were children. She would probably continue to like them. But she had already gone too far down her own path to turn back now.

She smiled and straightened her posture. She was determined not to second-guess things or to regret past decisions. This was the only way to ensure she would have the future she had chosen for herself. Part of achieving that future was giving up other potential sources of happiness.

As the discussion of Claudine's wedding ended, the conversation naturally shifted to talk of Riette's marriage prospects. There was a young lady. Claudine knew her well. She was pretty and well-behaved, and came from a good family. She made perfect sense as the next Marchioness Lindman.

After the tea, there was some free time before dinner. Claudine said she had a slight headache and went to the guestroom where she was staying. While her maid had gone to get some medicine, she sat in front of the fireplace and stared at the flames.

The Layla Llewellyn she knew was smart, crafty, and full of pride above her station.

She wasn't the type to stay in a man's shadow forever as his

mistress. Claudine figured that when the time was right, Layla would make her exit.

However, she also knew that there was a possibility that she was wrong. She wanted to be prepared for the possibility that Layla wouldn't want to leave after all. As she made this decision, the maid returned with the medicine.

Walking towards Claudine, the maid tripped on the edge of the rug and fell over. The sound of her cries mingled with the clatter of the tray and the crash of the medicine bottle and water glass smashing on the floor.

“Are you all right?” Claudine asked, slowly standing up and walking over to the maid.

Red in the face, the maid hurried to sit up. “Yes! Yes, Miss. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“Oh my. You don't look all right,” Claudine replied, looking at the back of the maid’s hand.

A shard of glass had severely cut her, and blood was pouring out of the wound.

“It's just a scratch, Miss. It stings a little, but it will heal in no time-”

“No,” Claudine said, cutting off the maid's words. “If you can't use your right hand, you won't be able to provide me with proper service.”

“Pardon? But Miss, this is-”

“Don't you agree, Marie?”

“Uh... Yes. Yes, Miss,” the maid replied, lowering her head in submission.

Claudine had brought this maid to Arvis with her from the House of Brandt. She had provided Claudine with loyal service since they were children. She had earned her mistress's favor by speaking little and always anticipating her needs.

In a short while, her injured hand was all bandaged up. Claudine and she strolled into the drawing room, where Elise von Herhardt and the other noblewomen were chatting. Elise's reaction upon

seeing the injured maid was just as Claudine had expected.

“Oh, how inconvenient for you, Claudine. I'll assign one of the Arvis maids to you.”

“I couldn't possibly,” Claudine replied. “The Arvis staff must be incredibly busy preparing for the arrival of the royal guests.”

Elise's eyes widened. “But Claudine, one can't get by without a maid. And I would feel so bad for you, anyway.”

“In that case, would you be able to summon Layla?”

“Layla? You mean the gardener's adopted daughter?”

“Yes. I've known her since we were children, so we get along well. And since it's winter break, she must be free. So, if you allow it, I'd like to have her attend to me for a few days.”

Countess Brandt gave her daughter a stern look, but Claudine paid her no mind.

“But Claudine, she hasn't worked as a maid before. I don't know if she'll be able to provide you with proper service.”

“It won't be that hard. She'll just need to do the things my maid can't do because of her hand. Mostly, I just want her to be around me to chat.”

“Sure, that makes sense. You *have* known her since childhood, after all,” Elise replied, nodding. She then rang the bell to summon her maid. “Go get Layla and bring her here.”

# Chapter 77:
## Poor Thing

At first, Layla couldn't understand what she had just heard. She had been listening carefully, but for some reason she couldn't connect the words to a meaning in her mind.

Perceiving her hesitation, Elise von Herhardt repeated herself. “You'll be helping Claudine for a while. You will be provided ample compensation.”

“But Ma'am, I don't do that kind of-”

“You'll just be staying near Claudine, so she has someone to talk to. You did that plenty of times when you were younger, so I trust you can manage. You won't have to do anything much harder than that. Occasionally if there's something her maid can't do because of her hand, you can help out with that as well.” With a worried look on her face, she continued. “I certainly hope you're not thinking of saying no. When Bill Remmer destroyed the greenhouse that Claudine loved so much, we dropped all charges against him and allowed him to continue working at Arvis. After we've shown such kindness, surely you can do this small favor for Claudine?” She hardly tried to hide her disdain for Bill Remmer as she said his name.

The other noblewomen started whispering among themselves about the gardener after Elise spoke.

“Don't worry, Layla,” added Claudine, who had been standing off to the side. “I won't pester you with too many requests. If you can just help me with some simple things, you'll be able to spend the rest of the time doing whatever you want here in the mansion.” She looked closely at Layla's ashen face. She was pleased to see that there was no sign of craftiness in her expression. She proceeded to deftly drive Layla into a corner. “I'm asking this favor of you, Layla. What do you think? You can do it for me, right?”

*Hey, Claudine!* mouthed Riette, who was sitting nearby. He

seemed to be trying to get Claudine to change her mind, but Claudine ignored him.

She was doing this just to prepare for all possibilities. If it turned out that Layla did not leave on her own, then Claudine would have to put up with having her as her husband's mistress. In that case, she would need to make sure that Layla observed the proper order of things. As long as Layla knew her place and wasn't greedy, Claudine would have no problem with her.

“Young lady, Claudine just made a direct request. Aren't you going to answer her?” one of the noblewomen asked in a harsh tone.

Layla looked like a lost child as she stared at Claudine. She clearly wanted to turn down the request if only she could.

*I can't believe those tear-filled eyes captured the duke's cold heart,* Claudine thought, analyzing Layla like a scientist observing a specimen. She felt no need to pressure her any further since she didn't really have a choice.

Sure enough, Layla soon lowered her head and said in a resigned tone, “Yes, Miss.”

“Thanks,” Claudine said, smiling and nodding. “How kind of you, Layla.”

* * *

Matthias's schedule during his four days in Ratse was packed. Most companies owned by the Herhardt family were headquartered in Karlsbar, but more than a few were based in the capital. Ratse was also an important foothold for maintaining good relations with the imperial family, as well as good political and social ties. Thus, it was just as important to the Herhardt family as was Arvis itself.

For this reason, the former dukes had split their time between the two locations, spending half the year at Arvis, and the other half in the capital. Matthias would have to live this way as well once he got married and bore an heir.

*Then maybe I should bring Layla to Ratse,* he thought, staring at the

ceiling of his office after dismissing a group of visitors.

The Herhardt family mansion in Ratse had been used for generations as the residence of both the head of the household and his mistress. Matthias's father's favorite mistress had lived there.

Growing up, whenever he had visited his father in the capital, the mistress had been there too. This had seemed completely natural to Matthias, and his mother had taken it in stride as well. His father had also shown his wife and son the courtesy of never bringing his mistress within Arvis's fences. This was the order of things in the Herhardt family, and it felt natural to Matthias that he should maintain that order.

If he didn't feel the urge to get rid of Layla, if his desire for her lasted longer than he had originally expected, then it seemed like a good idea to observe the same order that his predecessors had. After all, the thought of keeping Layla at Arvis after he got married was ridiculous.

*But will she go along with it...?* He frowned as he remembered how stubborn she could be. It didn't seem likely that she would obediently accept the life of a mistress. Especially because of what that would mean for her beloved uncle, Bill Remmer. Matthias knew that she would sooner bite off her own tongue than let Bill Remmer know that she was the duke's mistress.

“Layla,” he whispered to himself, savoring the name in his mouth like it was a fine liqueur. He slowly swept his hand over his face. As much as he enjoyed her defiant attitude, it made her very hard to deal with.

He had endless luxuries to offer her as his mistress, but his beautiful mistress didn't want to receive a single thing from him.

Thanks to the deal he had made with her, he had her firmly in his grasp, and yet she didn't feel like she truly belonged to him at all. He had thought that obtaining the object of his desire would have quenched and eliminated the desire, but it had only made the desire stronger and more intense.

He rubbed his chin, lost in thought, before finally letting out a

long sigh as he failed to reach a satisfying conclusion to his problem. At that moment, he realized that he had formed a habit of thinking about Layla. He was constantly thinking about that irritating woman, even though his thoughts about her always left him feeling unsatisfied.

Just then, Mark Evers, his assistant, knocked on the open door and said, “Your Grace, Colonel Pharrell has arrived.”

Matthias nodded and stood up. After adjusting his suit jacket, he walked out of the office with a bold, elegant gait.

As they walked down the hallway to the drawing room where the guest was waiting, Mark said, “The natural history museum responded to our request.”

Matthias stopped walking and turned towards Mark.

“They let us know the identity of the craftsman who constructed the crystal bird ornaments adorning the ceiling of the passageway between exhibits in the museum in spring of last year. It's a merchant named Kroken, who also supplies jewelry to the imperial family. Shall I order an ornament just like the ones in the museum?”

“Yes, do that,” Matthias replied. He then continued walking but stopped immediately and turned to face Mark again. “Actually, have it made with yellow wings.”

“Pardon?”

“The ornament. It should have yellow wings.” He then started walking with broad steps down the hallway again.

He vividly remembered the sight of Layla running towards the museum's passageway, as excited as a child at the sight of the multicolored crystal bird ornaments adorning the ceiling. He also recalled the bright smile on her face as she stood on her tiptoes trying to reach them, and the feeling when he had sneaked up behind her and suddenly lifted her up in the air.

*If I get one for her, will she smile like she did that day?* he had suddenly wondered one day as he passed by the natural history museum. It was for just this reason that he had instructed his

assistant to find out what he could about the ornaments and order one. It wasn't the type of thing he would typically do.

As he thought back on that day at the museum, he recalled that she had seemed very happy and excited the whole time. She had looked with wonder at all the specimens and fossils, taking down ample notes.

*Maybe she'd be open to moving to Ratse if I let her attend the university here,* he thought just as he reached the door of the drawing room.

He didn't especially like the idea of her attending the same university as Kyle Ettman, but he wasn't too worried about it. He knew she belonged to him.

Feeling relieved, he opened the door. Having cleared his private emotions from his mind, he was able to play the role of Duke Herhardt perfectly.

* * *

"Do you remember, Layla? This is where you and I first met," Claudine said in a nostalgic tone.

Sitting stiffly across from her, Layla looked nervously around the room and realized that it was indeed the very room to which Claudine had dragged her and then left her, as if she were a plaything, back when she was twelve years old. "Yes, Miss," she replied, lowering her eyes deferentially.

Claudine hadn't lied when she told her that the work would be easy. Other than a few small errands, she barely had to do anything physical. Mostly she was just there so that Claudine would have someone to talk to when she got bored. It was exactly the same role she had played when they were children.

"It feels like just yesterday that we first met, doesn't it? I can't believe how much time has passed since then," Claudine said with a sigh.

Just then, the maid with the injured hand entered and said it was time to dress up for the small tea party that was going to be held

that afternoon.

Layla closed the book that she had opened and followed Claudine to the guestroom where she was staying. The dress and accessories the maid had chosen were already laid out. Layla simply had to help Claudine put them on. The maid had told her that she could do this with her eyes closed, but it wasn't so easy for Layla, who wasn't used to this sort of attire.

“Goodness, Miss Llewellyn! That's not how you do it!” the maid shouted.

Layla blushed as she struggled with the complicated ribbons and fasteners on the dress.

“Don't yell at her like that, Marie. You're embarrassing her,” Claudine said. Turning to Layla, she smiled warmly and said, “Go on, Layla. You're doing fine.”

It was clear from the look on her face that Claudine had no intention of summoning another maid to help, so Layla tried her hardest to complete the task before her.

Even though she was taking forever to do something that an experienced maid would have been able to complete in an instant, she received no criticism from Claudine, who was showing the utmost patience. However, in the end, she still failed. Even when she tried her best, Layla was unable to make Claudine look as stylish as a noblewoman should.

Standing in front of the mirror, Claudine sighed and removed the hat Layla had just put on her. She then removed the gloves, shawl, and necklace in turn as well. The slow manner in which she did this made Layla feel all the more ashamed.

After putting the accessories back on with her own hands, Claudine turned towards Layla and smiled faintly. She looked incomparably more refined and elegant than she had just a moment before.

“Poor thing,” she said, giving Layla a pitying look.

This look brought back the same feeling of helplessness that Layla had felt when they were children.

“I guess you really don't know how to do anything,” Claudine whispered, trying not to sound disappointed or irritated.

# Chapter 78:
## Four People

Layla's room was filled with a gentle darkness, other than the light from the single lamp sitting on her desk. She sat on her bed with her arms around her knees, staring at the lamp. It was very late at night, but she couldn't sleep. The more she had tossed and turned to try to force herself to sleep, the clearer and more awake her mind had become.

Suddenly a strong wind rattled the window. Startled, she turned and looked. For a moment, she thought that maybe Phoebe had brought a note to the window, even though she knew she had carefully locked her cage. She reminded herself that Phoebe no longer paid any visits to the Ettman residence, and the duke was out of town.

Feeling relieved after thinking this through, she got out of bed and draped a shawl over her shoulders. She didn't have anything in particular that she was planning to do, she just couldn't stand the uneasy stillness in her room. Unpleasant memories of her lonesome childhood kept popping into her head. All the loneliness, sadness, and fear that she had felt back then seemed to have been rekindled recently.

She paced around her room for a while, then went to the kitchen and drank a glass of water. However, she still felt thirsty, and her lips started quivering. To try to calm herself down, she calculated how long it was going to be until Uncle Bill returned, but this ended up only making her feel more lonely.

*This is ridiculous,* she thought. *Uncle Bill has only been gone a day or two. Why is the fact that I'm alone affecting me so much right now?*

She double-checked that the door and windows were locked, then made a cup of hot tea and sat down at the kitchen table.

As the turbulent wind howled outside, she thought she could hear Claudine's voice saying, *"Poor thing."*

With each sip that she took of the hot tea, she felt that she was only getting colder. Eventually, she helplessly set the mug down on the table.

She wished that kicking sticks and stones on the path as she walked home could have let her forget her emotions like it had used to. On her way back from the mansion, she had simply kept her head down, looking at the shadow she was casting in the moonlight.

She felt guilty and embarrassed. No matter what Claudine did to insult or hurt her, she felt like she didn't have the right to get upset. She had stolen Claudine's fiancé. It didn't matter that she hadn't wanted to. She had done it all the same.

She no longer felt that she deserved to be called an outstanding adult. As she realized this, it made her hate the duke to an unbearable degree. Her sole consolation was the fact that she had avoided the misery of having him witness her acting as Claudine's maid. Of course, she knew he would have been sorry to miss such an entertaining sight.

She poured another cup of hot tea, then took off her glasses and set them down on the table. She rubbed her sore eyes and let out a long sigh.

She felt like she now understood what she was to Matthias von Herhardt. While he played the part of a perfect gentleman towards everyone else, he used her as an outlet to vent all his dark, twisted feelings. Never in his life had he let Claudine see those feelings.

Biting her lip, Layla stood up from her seat to rid her mind of idle thoughts. After checking the locks once more, she gazed out the window at the dark woods outside.

*I hate him.*

The various emotions that had been tormenting her all day fossilized into even more hatred towards the duke. The hurt that she had caused Kyle, and the hurt that doing so had caused herself, both transformed into hatred. She knew it wasn't fair. She couldn't blame all her problems on the duke. Even so, she wanted to hate

him. She enjoyed hating him.

*Maybe I should thank him for that,* she thought.

It was almost dawn by the time she went back to bed. *I wish he would hurry up and come back,* she thought. *So that I can just feel hatred towards him, and stop feeling so sad and lonely.*

* * *

"I think you've grown since the last time I saw you, Kyle. You look like a full-grown man now," Katharina von Herhardt cheerfully said as she looked at Kyle standing next to his father.

Kyle smiled back at her. He had always been a good boy in the dowager's eyes.

She turned to her doctor. "Thank you, Dr. Ettman. I appreciate you bringing Kyle with you today."

"Not at all. It's our pleasure to be able to see you today. Isn't that right, Kyle?"

Kyle smiled and nodded in response to his father's question. Seeing his gentle smile caused Katharina to smile once again.

Since the day she had first heard that Kyle had come back to Karlsbar, she had been thinking that it would be nice to see him. As it happened, Dr. Ettman was already scheduled to make a house call for a checkup, so she had asked if he could bring Kyle along. The father and son had readily obliged and had come to Arvis together.

Dowager Herhardt had a mild cold but nothing more severe than that, so the checkup didn't take very long. Most of the time was spent in friendly conversation.

Knowing that the dowager had adored him since he was young, Kyle did his best to act cheerful and lively with her. He couldn't help that his thoughts kept periodically drifting to Layla, but he did a good job of keeping the worry from showing on his face when this happened. Ever since the day they had seen each other, he had been mulling over their interaction in his mind. No matter how much he thought about it, he kept coming to the same conclusion: *She lied.*

Once the checkup was done, Kyle planned to find a time to sneak

away and see Layla. He was determined to find out the reason she had lied to him.

Dowager Herhardt, who was feeling quite drowsy all of a sudden, bid farewell to the father and son, thus concluding the checkup. Kyle hurried out of the bedroom, his father following just behind.

A maid who had been waiting by the door approached them. “Miss Claudine would like to see the two of you.”

Their eyes widened in surprise.

“Lady Claudine? She wants to see us?” Dr. Ettman asked.

“Yes, she requests that you join her for a cup of tea,” she calmly replied. “Shall we go to her?” It was clear that she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

* * *

Elise von Herhardt had gone on an afternoon outing into town along with the other middle-aged noblewomen, so the drawing room was quiet. Claudine was doing embroidery in front of the fireplace while Layla sat across from her and read a book in the winter sunlight.

*The checkup is probably wrapping up right about now,* Claudine thought, setting down her embroidery frame and glancing at the door. She then shifted her gaze to Layla, who was intently focused on her book. She looked at Layla with a motherly gaze, like she was looking at a child. *Matthias will be back tomorrow,* she reminded herself. She wasn't foolish enough to let her fiancé see his mistress being humiliated. Thus, today would have to be the last day she acted as her maid. *If today's her last day,* she thought, *I'll have to give her a parting gift.* A devious smile appeared on her face.

For the past few days, Layla had provided faithful maid service. She had more confidence than Claudine thought was appropriate for a lowly orphan girl, but this had been the case ever since she was a child. On the other hand, she didn't seem to have let her status as Matthias's mistress get to her head. On the contrary, she was even more obedient and polite than before.

She actually seemed like an honorable mistress. Claudine knew that calling her this was ridiculous. It was like saying that someone was a good thief. However, in Layla's case, it felt like an appropriate epithet. If she was behaving this well right now, then she seemed unlikely to cause any problems even after Claudine and Matthias got married.

“It would've been nice if you could have married Dr. Ettman's son, Layla,” Claudine said.

Taken aback by the abrupt comment, Layla looked up. “Pardon?”

“You heard me. Was his name Kyle? I just thought that it would've been best for you if you had married him and gone to the university in the capital.” Ignoring the frown that was appearing on Layla's face, she continued. “The two of you were such a good match. And I doubt any man could make you as happy as he could.”

“Miss Claudine...”

“Mrs. Ettman is so cruel. Why did she have to separate you and Kyle like that?”

“I'm sorry, Miss Claudine, but that's all in the past now. Kyle and I don’t—”

“I know, Layla,” Claudine said. A vaguely sadistic smile appeared on her face. “You and Kyle don't have that sort of relationship anymore. You can never go back to the way things were. That's the saddest part of all.” *You can't run away with him even though he came here to get you because your wings have been clipped by my fiancé,* she thought. Rather than saying this, she smiled at her with a look in her eyes that seemed to say, *Poor thing. How sad that you've become the mistress of the very man who ruined your life. Kyle Ettman could have made such a good husband to you. I'll give you the gift of having tea with him.*

* * *

The servants hurried to the mansion's main hall after being summoned by Hessen, the butler. Duke Herhardt had returned home more than a full day ahead of schedule.

“W-welcome home, Your Grace,” Hessen said in an uncharacteristically flustered manner as he rushed out the front door to greet the duke.

The rest of the servants looked equally flustered as they lowered their heads in deference.

Matthias gave a quick nod before striding into the main hall.

“Lady Herhardt has gone on an outing, and Dowager Herhardt is taking a nap,” Hessen reported.

“What about Lady Claudine?” Matthias asked.

“She is in the small drawing room on the second floor.”

Upon hearing this, Matthias changed directions to walk towards the stairs leading to the second-floor hallway. Hessen was concerned about his master seeing Layla working as a maid, but he couldn't say anything, so he simply had to follow silently behind. Just as they reached the hallway leading to the second-floor drawing room, they encountered Dr. Ettman and his son.

“Hello, Your Grace,” Dr. Ettman said.

Kyle bowed his head respectfully.

Noticing the questioning look in the duke's eyes, Dr. Ettman explained, “Lady Claudine invited us for tea, so we're on our way right now.”

“I see,” Matthias replied, smiling politely and nodding. “Let's walk together.” He glanced briefly at Kyle before walking ahead towards the drawing room.

Kyle and his father followed a few steps behind.

When Hessen saw this, his face went white as a sheet. He knew he needed to stop this unfortunate encounter from happening, but he had no idea what to say. “Y-Your Grace…!” he finally shouted, but it was too late.

Matthias opened the door to the drawing room.

Past the three men standing in the doorway, Hessen could see Claudine and Layla standing stiffly inside. *Oh my goodness,* he thought, closing his eyes in dread.

# Chapter 79:
## Maid

Matthias first looked at Layla. Then his gaze slowly shifted to Claudine, and then to Dr. Ettman and his son. This was all he needed in order to grasp what was going on.

Recovering her smile quickly, Claudine broke the ice, saying, “You're back ahead of schedule, Duke Herhardt.”

“Yes, I am,” he replied, sauntering straight towards Claudine. “My business wrapped up earlier than expected.”

Layla, who had been standing next to Claudine, took several steps backward until she was in the shadow next to the window.

“Looks like you have a guest,” he remarked, looking at Layla.

“Well... no, actually. She's not a guest,” Claudine said, choosing to tell the truth rather than deliver an easily detected lie. “My usual maid badly injured her hand, so Layla has been providing me with maid service for the last few days. I'm so grateful to her.” With each word she said, she felt calmer, until finally, she felt like this unexpected turn of events was actually for the best. Now she would get to see how Duke Herhardt would treat his mistress when in the presence of his fiancée.

“Ah, maid service...? I see,” he replied in a flat tone as he rose from his seat and stood next to his fiancée.

Claudine maintained her dignity by linking her arm in his.

“Then I suppose your guests must be Dr. Ettman and his son,” Matthias added, looking towards the rattled-looking father and son.

“Yes, they are my guests,” she replied without hesitation. “I hadn't seen them in so long, I thought it would be nice to have tea together. Oh! I just realized...” She put on a very embarrassed face as if she had just remembered that things were awkward between Layla and Kyle. “I'm so sorry. I didn't think this through. How rude of me.”

“Not at all, Lady Claudine,” Dr. Ettman said, trying to sound as

calm as he could manage.

“Then we should have tea with our guests,” Matthias said, acting as if there were nothing strange or problematic about the mix of people present. Taken aback by Matthias's reaction, Claudine's eyes started to tremble.

“We have to go, actually,” Kyle said after taking a few deep breaths. “You have another house call to get to, don't you, Father?”

“Ah. Yes, Kyle. That's right. I must have forgotten,” Dr. Ettman quickly replied. He was looking with unmistakable sympathy at Layla, who had her head lowered.

“Oh, that's a shame. We'll have to send you a formal invitation next time.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Well, it was a pleasure,” Dr. Ettman said, wanting to leave as quickly as possible for poor Layla's sake.

However, Kyle simply remained standing in place, staring at Layla. After a moment, he shouted, “Layla, you should come too!” His words rang out through the silent drawing room. “You're not a maid. What are you doing here?”

Unused to seeing his son expressing his anger in this way, Dr. Ettman let out a flustered moan but couldn't find any words.

Everyone's eyes were on Matthias, while his own remained fixed on Layla. She stood in an uncomprehending daze for a while before looking at Kyle with a desperate, pleading look, as if he were the only person in the world to her at that moment.

“The doctor and his son should leave now and attend to the concerns of the Ettman family. As the lord of Arvis, I will attend to the concerns of the Herhardt family,” Matthias calmly said, negating the effect of Kyle's outburst.

For a short while, Kyle maintained his defiant posture as if he wasn't going to budge until Layla came with him. Soon, however, he saw the awkward look on his father's face and the pleading look on Layla's, and he caved. Still upset, he swept his hands over his face and turned around, then stomped out of the room.

Dr. Ettman hurried to follow after his son. Matthias gave a look

to the flustered maids standing by the door, indicating that they should leave as well. Now the only people remaining in the room were Layla, Claudine, and the duke.

“I guess you and I will have to finish the tea, then,” Matthias said, casually leading Claudine back to the tea table.

Her face was noticeably pale as she sat in the chair he pulled out for her. Before sitting in his own chair, he looked at Layla, who was still by the window. She was staring with sad eyes at the spot where Kyle had been standing.

*He's not coming for you, Layla,* he wanted to whisper. Instead, he just flashed her a smile.

Noticing his smile out of the corner of her eye, she looked towards him and glared, biting her lip. Her beautiful eyes were now filled with anger. Matthias felt much better.

* * *

“Your mother and the other ladies should be returning from their outing any minute now,” Claudine said, swallowing her pride. “I need to go get ready for dinner. Don't you need to do that too, Duke Herhardt?”

“I'm going to finish my tea first. You go ahead,” Matthias replied.

“All right... Well... I'll see you later, then,” she said, rising from her seat resignedly.

“Won't you need your maid to help you get ready, My Lady?” he asked. Taking a leisurely sip of his lukewarm tea, he turned to look at Layla.

The whole time that Claudine and Matthias had been drinking their tea, she had been standing next to the window, almost like a child standing in the corner for punishment.

Claudine looked back and forth between Matthias and Layla a few times, then let out an uncharacteristically awkward laugh. “I don't think that will be necessary.”

Duke Herhardt was clearly on his best behavior. He had allowed his fiancée to save face, and he was treating his mistress like she

was no more than a shadow. It was exactly the behavior that Claudine wanted from him, and yet she still felt flustered. She almost would have preferred it if he had lost his temper and yelled at her.

“You did a great job, Layla,” she said, preserving her pride by giving Layla some condescending praise.

She glanced at a maid who had been standing off to the side. The maid then walked over to Layla and placed some money in her hand. Matthias watched this without batting an eyelash.

Claudine and the maid then departed, leaving the drawing room in silence.

Layla stood in place, like someone whose every emotion had been wiped away. If it weren't for the slight quivering in the hand with which she was holding the money, she would have looked just like a mannequin. Her face had gone pale, making the red of her lips stand out.

Matthias set down his teacup, which he had been clutching with an iron grip, and stood up and walked over to Layla. “Wait for me in the cabin. If you're not there, I'll pay you a visit at Mr. Remmer's cottage. Your choice,” he whispered.

Her gaze remained fixed on the floor. She didn't react in any way, except that her hand started quivering even more as it held the money.

He then calmly walked out of the room, leaving her behind. Instead of going to his bedroom, he went to his study. Once there, he rang the bell to summon Hessen. “Have Dr. Ettman come back.”

Hessen's eyes widened at this unexpected command. “But Your Grace, Dr. Ettman already completed the dowager's checkup earlier this afternoon...”

“Apologize for the inconvenience but tell him that there is someone at Arvis in need of urgent care,” he replied in a flat tone.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Hessen replied. He was worried about what was going to happen when the doctor returned, but he had no choice but to comply with his master's orders.

* * *

Claudine changed her dress and returned to the drawing room. Matthias and Layla had left, and the room was now full of the noblewomen and gentlemen who were back from their outing. At first, the ladies were absorbed in casual conversation, but when they saw Claudine, many of them erupted into exaggerated words of praise.

“You look so pretty, Claudine!”

“Well, with Claudine's height and figure, she looks good no matter what she wears.”

“Oh my, how can you make such a flippant remark when Marquess Lindman is present?”

The ladies laughed mischievously as they turned to look at Riette, who was sitting on the sofa. Claudine, who had been expressing her modesty with a bashful smile, also looked in his direction. Riette had just returned from a social club downtown. This fact alone made Claudine feel much better. *Sure,* she thought, *maybe it won't be so bad.*

Once she started to look on the bright side, she realized that things were actually going quite well. Layla had acted very obediently like she knew her place. And Matthias had shown that he knew the proper way to treat his mistress when in mixed company.

The atmosphere in the drawing room grew more and more lively until Matthias's entrance brought the room to sudden silence. Confusingly, he was accompanied by the family doctor, who had left a few hours earlier.

“Dr. Ettman! I already had my checkup earlier this afternoon, didn't I?” asked Katharina von Herhardt, looking very confused.

“Yes, Ma'am, but I'm told that there's another patient in need of urgent care,” Dr. Ettman replied.

“Urgent care? I had no idea. Is someone sick? Or hurt?”

The noblewomen and gentlemen exchanged bewildered looks at each other while Claudine stared at Matthias in disbelief.

*No way,* she thought, clutching the hem of her dress tightly. *He can't be doing what I think he's doing.*

However, Matthias proceeded to do exactly the thing Claudine hoped he wouldn't.

“Please summon your maid, My Lady,” he said.

“My... maid?” Claudine replied.

“Yes, the maid who badly injured her hand.”

Everyone's eyes widened in surprise.

“Goodness, Matthias! Did you really summon Dr. Ettman back here to tend to the wound of a mere maid?” Elise asked, frowning.

“Yes, Mother. I know that Lady Claudine adores that maid,” Matthias calmly replied. “It must be so hard for her to have her maid unable to provide maid service because of an injured hand. Isn't that so, My Lady?”

“Yes, it is, but... there's no need for you to go to such lengths, Duke Herhardt.”

“Nonsense. She's your personal maid. She needs to receive medical attention.” Before Claudine could respond, Matthias turned to the servants standing by the door. “Bring Lady Claudine's maid here at once.”

# Chapter 80:
## What You Want To Do

The maid started sobbing. Her cries rang out in the otherwise silent drawing room.

“Goodness, she was faking it,” Elise von Herhardt said, looking with blatant contempt at the embarrassed maid.

With the bandage removed from her hand, it was clear that the maid had only suffered a very minor cut. It was certainly not severe enough to stop her from being able to work.

“What an ill-mannered girl!” Katharina von Herhardt exclaimed, looking at the maid with just as much disdain as her daughter-in-law was.

Meanwhile, Claudine remained silent, with her hands stiffly clasping each other on her lap.

“Please take another look, Doctor,” Matthias said, breaking the silence. He was looking at Dr. Ettman with a concerned expression.

“Just to make sure she doesn't have any broken bones or anything.”

“But, Your Grace, I don't think...” Dr. Ettman trailed off. The state of her injury had already been clear the moment he had removed the bandage, but he complied with the duke's request and took another look anyway. “Hmm... the bones in her hand are fine. All she has is a slight cut.”

The room erupted in gasps and murmurs. All the while, Claudine remained sitting with perfect posture. Other than a slight shaking in her eyes, she appeared completely calm.

“But I'm sure I heard that she was too injured to work. Isn't that right, Lady Claudine?” Matthias asked, turning toward his fiancée with a perplexed look on his face.

Everyone else turned to look at her as well.

“Um... yes,” she replied. “I really thought that she was.”

“Then I guess your maid has deceived you, my lady.”

After briefly making eye contact with her maid, she calmly replied, “I can't believe it, but you seem to be right.”

Matthias rose from his chair and approached the sniveling maid. She seemed ready to take full blame for what had happened. This gave Matthias a new appreciation for Claudine von Brandt's ability to command loyalty from her attendants. It was a very desirable quality for a future duchess.

“You deceived her...” he said. There was a hint of a smile on his face.

The maid flinched and covered her face, then lowered her hands and looked up at him.

He looked into her tear-filled eyes. “How dare you deceive my woman?” With each word he spoke, his voice grew even softer.

Rather than anger, he seemed to be feeling amusement at the situation.

Finally, Claudine spoke up. “Please forgive Marie, Duke Herhardt. I'll apologize on her behalf.”

Ignoring her mother's attempt to dissuade her, she walked straight over to the maid, who looked like she was about to faint. “Marie seems to have been having a really hard time lately. If she needed a break badly enough that she was willing to lie to get one, it just shows how negligent I've been as her mistress. I thus ask that you forgive her and blame me instead.”

“You're apologizing on behalf of the maid who deceived you? How generous of you, my lady.”

“She's been my maid for a long time. I'm not going to coldly cast someone away for making one silly mistake.” Being driven into a corner only made her more bold in her response. “You should understand this better than anyone, Duke Herhardt. After all, you're the one who decided to drop the charges against the gardener and allow him to continue working at Arvis after he caused that terrible accident.” She stared at Matthias with a cold glint in her eyes. It was as if there was a contest going on to see which of them could act more calm, and she was determined not to lose. Even if he knew

everything already, she wasn't going to let it show on her face.

Matthias looked at her for a moment, then smiled and nodded. “At first, you were opposed to my decision not to fire the gardener. I'm glad to hear you understand now.”

Claudine silently gasped at this unexpected counter.

“You have such incredible understanding and generosity. It's truly impressive. It makes me want to forgive your maid as well.”

As she listened to Matthias praise her like a child, Claudine's cheeks gradually started to redden.

“But my lady, if you're going to forgive your maid, shouldn't she first atone for her sins in some manner?”

“Oh, yes... I'll go with her to see Layla tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Because Layla was more inconvenienced by Marie's lie than anyone.” She was trying her hardest to stay calm, but the embarrassment of the moment was getting to her. Her face was now bright red.

“Ah, that makes sense.” Matthias nodded and then narrowed his eyes. “But wouldn't it be a little strange for you to accompany your maid on the visit? Wouldn't that make it seem like it was your mistake, not Marie’s?”

“He's right, Claudine,” Countess Brandt said. “It's your maid's stupid mistake, not yours. Why would you go and apologize to Layla?”

Claudine was growing visibly nervous, while Matthias seemed all the more calm.

“You should leave the apologizing to your maid. Your dignity and mine are one and the same, after all,” Matthias said as if to console her.

She felt a chill in her bones. All of a sudden, he had bested her, and it made her feel like a fool. As strange as it sounds, she felt lucky at that moment that this coldhearted fellow was enamored with Layla Llewellyn, rather than herself.

“Yes, Duke Herhardt,” she finally said, giving the answer he had

forced her into.

Even as his fiancée and adversary was giving in, his face showed no signs of joy or satisfaction. Instead, he turned towards the maid again and said, “You'd better remember the mercy your mistress has just shown you, Marie.”

* * *

With no lights on inside or out, the cabin was almost invisible amid the darkness by the river. White steam escaped Matthias's mouth as he exhaled into the frigid night air.

Having decided against going to the gardener's cottage, he ascended the stairs to the second floor of the cabin. Maybe that foolish woman had simply left the lights off.

He unlocked and opened the door. It was silent within. Not only were all the lamps off but there didn't seem to be any fires in any of the fireplaces, either. The air inside was ice cold. He was all but certain that Layla wasn't there, but he decided to look around the cabin just in case. He couldn't shake the faint feeling of hope, or perhaps of concern that she might be there after all.

With calm, dark eyes, he surveyed the rooms for signs of human presence but couldn't find any. As he slowly walked through the upper-floor rooms, he felt at the edges of the box he was carrying deep in his coat pocket.

The air inside the cabin had been getting colder the whole time he was away from Arvis. He could feel his lips drying up. As he opened the door to the bedroom, he actually hoped that she had stubbornly defied his order. As if to confirm his hope, the bedroom was just as dark and still as the rest of the cabin. Breathing a sigh of relief, he started to turn around to leave, when something caught his eye.

*No way,* he thought with a gasp. He almost couldn't believe what he was seeing, but by now, his eyes had thoroughly adjusted to the dark, so he knew he wasn't imagining things. She was sitting on the easy chair in front of the cold fireplace, curled up like a fetus, fast

asleep. She was wearing a winter coat, gloves, and a scarf, but even those were insufficient to withstand the extreme cold.

He relaxed his tightly clenched fists and swept his hands over his face. He couldn't believe that she had obediently followed his order this time after having always been so stubborn and defiant in the past. He clicked his tongue in disbelief and took a step towards her. Just then, she opened her eyes. Having just awoken, she looked pure and naive. As she recognized him, a look of fear and anger flashed across her face, soon followed by a look of resignation.

“Looks like you've given up on starving yourself to death and have decided to freeze to death instead?” He walked over to the fireplace. There was already firewood stacked up inside, so all he had to do was light it. “Or do you just not know how to light a fire?” He turned his back to the crackling fire and looked down at her.

Still curled up on the chair, she glared at him. “Then someone might have seen.”

“Might have seen what?”

“The smoke coming out of the chimney.” The light from the fire made it more apparent how pale her face was from the cold. “Someone might have gotten suspicious if smoke was coming out of the chimney when you weren't here.”

“Do you really think someone would have noticed at this time of night?”

“I didn't want to take that chance.” She stopped hugging her legs and slowly lowered her feet to the floor.

A twisted smile appeared on his face as he watched her rubbing her gloved hands together. “It didn't occur to you to go home, then?”

“You ordered me to wait here for you.”

“Since when have you cared about following my orders?”

“Well, you said that if I wasn't here, you'd go to the cottage.” While her voice sounded weak, she was looking at Matthias with a cold glare. “I'd rather freeze to death than let you enter my home.”

“Really? I'll have to pay you a visit, then.” He put another log in the fire. “If you're that opposed to it, I bet you'll cry beautifully.”

“I really dislike you. I hate you.”

“Try a little harder, Layla. You always say the same things. It's boring.”

“I'm glad it's boring,” she flatly replied. “The last thing I want is for you to derive any enjoyment from me.”

He could tell from her bold attitude that she wouldn't have frozen to death. Chuckling, he took off his coat and threw it on the bench next to the bed. She flinched and started to stand up, but before she could, he scooped her up and held her in his arms.

Holding her cold body tightly as she tried to wriggle free, he sat down in the same chair on which she had just been sitting. She continued to vainly struggle for a moment, then quickly gave up and went slack. He slowly caressed her hair with a gentle touch.

“Please be quick tonight,” she whispered, her head leaning on his shoulder.

He froze. “Be quick with what?” His voice was as cold as the air in the room.

“With... whatever. Whatever it is you want to do.” She weakly lifted her head to look at him. Her eyes looked like those of an old woman who had been through a long life of hardships. “No matter what I say, I know that you'll still do whatever you please... So, I just ask that you get it over with quickly.” Her eyelashes cast a quivering shadow on her face. Her tear-filled eyes were no longer looking at Matthias but were now staring into space. “I just want to go home and sleep.”

# Chapter 81:
## My Feelings Will Never Change

Matthias forcefully grabbed Layla's hair. He wanted to jolt her into submission. He wanted her to look at him, even if he had to forcibly turn her head towards him. He wanted to use her and make her cry. Or perhaps he wanted to get rid of her. And yet, when all of these wild cravings gathered together in him, they caused his hand to go limp and let go of her hair.

Her slender body was also limp. He knew he could do whatever he wanted to her. He pulled her into his embrace again. As he removed her scarf and coat, he could feel her growing tense, but she didn't try to stop him. The unfocused look in her eyes made him feel like he was holding a doll.

He removed her glasses and her old, worn-out gloves. Her hands were pale from the cold. As he slowly interlocked fingers with her, she flinched and looked up. When their eyes met, he felt much better.

He stayed motionless for a while as he shared his body warmth with her. She looked intently at him, then averted her eyes, then looked at him again with her head cocked slightly. The blood returned to her cheeks, giving them a healthy glow.

When he finally let go of her hands, she let out a faint cry. *Her lips are cute,* he thought to himself. Before he knew it, he was kissing her. He sucked on her lips, then stuck his tongue in her mouth. As he coiled his tongue around hers, he could feel her spine quivering. He caressed her hair for a moment and then grabbed a handful of it. When he did, she let out a quiet moan.

She looked like she was uncomfortable and in pain, but she wasn't trying to break free from him. Instead, she closed her eyes in resignation and tried to endure everything—this man, the memories that were tormenting her, and the pleasurable sensations that were betraying her heart. Her lips were bright red and swollen from him

sucking on them. Her body, which had been painfully cold, was now feverishly hot. She expected painful feelings to follow, but all he did was continue to kiss her slowly. After a long while, he pulled his lips away from her.

“Are you done?” she asked, panting.

Giving no reply, he simply stared at her indifferently.

“Can I... go now?”

Just as she was about to get up, he wrapped his arms around her waist. “You should be as honest with me as your body is, Layla.”

She flinched as he started to caress her blushing cheek. All of a sudden, she could feel the wetness between her legs. He was behaving very casually as if he had already noticed. She hated that. Frantically wiping the moisture from her lips, she said, “Th-that has nothing to do with how I feel. When I'm cold, I shiver; when I'm in pain, I wince... It's the same sort of automatic reaction. It would happen no matter who was touching me.”

“Really...?” he asked, raising one eyebrow.

His calmness was making her feel agitated. “I really dislike you,” she said. “Those are my true feelings, and they'll never change.”

Her vision started to blur, and she noticed the glow from the fireplace. Suddenly she recalled taking the money that Claudine had made her maid give her. She also recalled the duke indifferently witnessing her take it.

*I can't live like this,* she thought. She could feel anger building up inside her. All the hatred and resentment that she had felt too guilty to direct towards Claudine was now targeting the duke, the man who was ruining her life.

“Surely you have enough self-respect not to become attached to a woman who hates you?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“Then let me go. Please!”

As if to mock her plea, he stood up with her still in his arms. “I told you, Layla, I find it amusing when you adopt that cheeky attitude towards me.” He laid her down on the bed and smiled at

her. “And when I get amused like that, it drives me wild.”

His voice was calm, almost monotone, and yet it sent shivers down her spine. As he removed her sweater and started to undo the buttons of her blouse, she felt oddly relieved. The sooner they started, the sooner it would finish, and then she could leave. She was used to the pain by now. She felt sad to acknowledge that, but it was the truth. She turned her head and, staring at the decorative paneling on the wall, she tightly shut her lips and held her breath.

As he looked at her bare skin, it made him think of the beautiful bird he had brought from the capital. Before heading to the train station in Ratse, he had stopped by the jeweler's shop and picked up the bird ornament he had had Hessen order. The moment he saw the sparkling crystal figure, he felt like he had been transported back to the natural history museum, where Layla had reached to try to touch an identical ornament with golden wings just like this one had. It was such a small, insignificant moment, he was surprised that he remembered it at all.

He took off her stockings, leaving her fully nude. He slowly shifted his gaze up from her toes, stopping at the beautifully moist area between her legs. He was surprisingly calm for a man who had just undressed a woman. His gaze continued up her body and stopped at her face.

After looking at her for a long while, he quietly said, “You've become very obedient, Layla.”

She then heard the sound of him removing his clothes, piece by piece.

The undulating glow of the fire illuminated his large, sleek body. She looked at him, transfixed by the shadows playing upon his sturdy frame and well-defined muscles. Her heart was now beating so quickly it hurt.

He removed his shoes, sock garters, and socks, then sat down next to her. Only then did she snap out of her daze somewhat. After a moment, she realized she was staring, so she turned her head, but by that time his naked body was already on top of her. As she felt

her hard nipples touching his bare skin, her vision went blurry. She felt overwhelmed by the size and strength of his naked body.

He leaned on his elbow and looked at her. His body cast a shadow on her writhing body. “What can I do?” he asked, cocking his head slightly.

She had no choice but to look at him—he was filling her entire field of vision.

“I enjoy it when you act submissive too.”

His coldly smiling face looked handsome.

* * *

“Say it again, Layla,” he said, smiling as he looked down at her, moaning and writhing beneath him. “Tell me that you dislike me. That you hate me. That you're going to leave. Give me the pleasure of hearing you say those things, Layla.”

*D-did I answer him? What did I say?* She vaguely recalled saying something in response to him, but her mind was foggy, and she couldn't remember what she had said. She bit her lip to try to keep the moans from escaping her mouth, but it was no use. They mingled with the wet sound of him entering her repeatedly.

Suddenly she realized that she had felt a vague sense of hope back in the mansion. The moment the duke had entered the drawing room where she had been sitting with Claudine, and had locked eyes with her, she had felt not only embarrassment but also hope. Like a fool, she had gotten excited when she saw him.

She felt deep humiliation, and yet she couldn't stop herself from continuing to moan. His hands were coated with a clear liquid. She knew what it was immediately. As much as she hated herself for it, she kept moaning.

She felt like he was carving a message inside of her that said, *You're so worthless that you're not even worthy of becoming a tiny stain in the life of this noble gentleman. He's going to play with you for a while and then cast you aside.*

She suddenly remembered seeing him calmly walk to Claudine's

side, whereupon Claudine had casually linked her arm in his. Seeing them do this in front of her had made her feel worthless and pathetic. She was desperately holding on to his shoulders. Her trembling body didn't feel like it belonged to her as she strained to accommodate him inside of her. *How can this be happening? How can my body be so at odds with my mind? How can-* "Augh!" A scream suddenly escaped her lungs, wiping her mind clear of all thoughts.

She felt like she was being swallowed up by simultaneous feelings of shame and rapture, of pleasure and pain. She tried to protect her pride by turning her head away, but he wouldn't allow even that. Firmly clutching her chin to keep her facing him, he looked at her face as she feverishly panted and sniffled.

Her gentle eyes narrowed slightly, and the tears that had welled up in them started flowing down. He licked them off her face. Doing this had become a habit for him. Just then, it occurred to him that he had been thinking about her face the entire time he was away from Arvis. It had only been a few days, but he had thought about her too many times to count. It hadn't been like this before. He wasn't sure how to feel about it.

And it wasn't just that.

There were many things about his recent behavior that perplexed him—his sudden decision to order that fanciful ornament; the fact that after receiving it, he had opened the box several times to look; the way he had felt upon seeing Layla acting as Claudine's maid.

No matter how much he mulled over it, he couldn't understand why he was feeling and behaving like this. To rid himself of the displeasure this caused him, he pulled her limp body against his and entered her again.

She felt hot and moist inside. Her moans grew faster and louder, mingling with the creaking of the bed. She stared at her legs resting against his sweaty shoulders for a while, then she sniffled and closed her eyes. Her distressed moans were like beautiful music to his ears. Intoxicated by the melody, he started thrusting even harder.

By the time he seemed to be nearing climax, she was too exhausted either to push him away or to hold on to him anymore. The moans that were uncontrollably flowing out of her mingled with the creaking of the bed.

In sharp contrast to the unbearable cold she had felt a short while earlier, she now felt waves of heat coursing through her body.

He wildly went in and out of her, digging deeper and deeper until he started bumping against something deep inside her. A hot sensation then spread throughout her body, and without thinking about it, she pulled him closer to her.

He gave a few final thrusts inside her trembling body, then withdrew. She could feel a thick, warm liquid seeping out of her. This made her ashamed, but she couldn't do anything but lie there panting. Meanwhile, he got off the bed.

She expected to hear the sound of the shower turning on, but instead, after a short while, he returned to her side. Wondering what was going on, she weakly opened her eyes. With a robe loosely draped over his shoulders, he was holding a washbasin full of steamy-warm water.

She cocked her head uncertainly as he sat down on the edge of the bed. She stared nervously at his large hands as they submerged a washcloth in the basin and then wrung it out. “I can d-do th-”

“Stay still,” he whispered, gently pressing down her shoulder to keep her from sitting up. He placed the warm washcloth against her cheek. “Relax, Layla.”

With a tender touch that was worlds apart from the ferociousness with which he had been thrusting inside of her moments earlier, he started wiping off the white stains he had left on her eyelashes, cheeks, and lips.

Flustered, she tried to grab his wrist, but she was no match for his strength. It felt strange and indecent to face him, so she closed her eyes. She thought she heard a faint chuckle as he placed the washcloth on her chest.

His hand held the washcloth over her left breast for a long time,

feeling the pounding of her heart.

# Chapter 82:
## You're Lying

Once he was done wiping down Layla's body, Matthias lay down next to her. Enough time had passed for her body to cool down, but he noticed that it was still flushed red. It looked nice. He thought about putting a blanket over her, then changed his mind. The heat from the fire would be enough to keep her warm. Even if it wasn't, he still wasn't going to give her a blanket.

He pulled the stubbornly silent woman into his arms. The hand marks and hickeys which had faded from her body while he was gone had been replaced with fresh new ones. With a satisfied smile on his face, he gently caressed her shoulders, breasts, and belly. He felt a bit silly treating her so gently, but he wasn't ashamed.

When his hand drifted down between her legs, she squirmed, and her eyes shot open. He chuckled at her cute reaction.

"Don't do that," she said, carefully enunciating each word to make sure he understood her. After a moment, she grabbed his wrist.

Her grip was very weak, but he didn't shake her hand off.

"Y-you already had your fill of me," she said. Of course, he had gone on for much longer on previous occasions, but she was pretending not to remember that.

It no longer hurts like it had at first, but this actually made it harder for her. The pain had been bad—it had felt like she was being torn in half—but she preferred that over the deep shame that she felt at the fact that being with him now gave her pleasure.

He stopped caressing her swollen nether region and, putting one arm around her waist and the other behind her head, looked down at his little bird of a mistress. She glared at him intensely as if they were having a staring contest.

"Come to the capital with me," he whispered as he caressed her disheveled hair.

He didn't want to see her acting as a maid again. In any case, he couldn't keep a mistress at the family estate after he was married. Moving a little early sounded even better.

Her eyes narrowed. “Why should I?”

“You wanted to go to college, didn't you?”

“Are you saying you'll pay for my tuition?”

“If you want.”

She thought for a moment, then firmly shook her head. “No. I don't want that. I don't want to sell my body for college tuition.” She had a fierce look in her eyes, but her voice was weak and shaky.

He looked at the grave expression on her face and laughed coldly, resisting the urge to sigh. He knew that she wasn't saying this to punish herself. This was his smart little bird of a mistress's way of insulting her master. They had their deal, and her body was no more than a means of fulfilling that deal. He could plainly see that the various things she was doing to get on his nerves were intended to make him understand this. He suddenly felt irritated at himself for always falling for her tricks.

“Layla, do you really think the way you just lie there like a block of wood is worth me paying your college tuition?” he asked, slowly increasing the strength with which he was clutching her soft hair. The softness of his tone stood in contrast to how insulting his question was.

Her face went bright red. “If not, then why are you even offering?” she asked, panting.

“Hard to say,” he honestly replied. He then sank into thought. There really wasn't any particular reason why he needed to send his mistress to college. He could simply have her live a life of luxury in the Ratse mansion. “I guess I'm just trying to be kind,” he finally said, smirking.

She gasped and started to get up, but he stopped her by pressing her shoulders down against the bed.

Her stubborn attitude was getting on his nerves, but he preferred

it over the meek attitude she had displayed while Claudine was insulting her or the way that she had been sleeping alone in the cold, dark bedroom earlier. As ridiculous as it sounded, he didn't mind having a mistress who would stand up to him occasionally.

It was just one of a pile of things he didn't understand about her.

He thought back to the situation with Claudine. Even though her scheme to make Layla act as her maid was impertinent, she was his fiancée, so he had to place her before Layla. Reprimanding Claudine was against the proper order of things. No matter what Claudine had done, it wasn't right for him to treat her worse than he was treating Layla. He understood this principle, but he felt reluctant to observe it.

To stop himself from sighing, he placed his mouth on top of Layla's tightly-shut lips. When she tried to squirm away, he got on top of her and pinned her against the bed.

It didn't take long for his impulsive kiss to reignite his lust. By the time she had sensed this, he was already inside of her. Having just wiped her clean, he was going to make her dirty again.

Instead of trying to get away like before, she just stared intently at his face. She wasn't stupid enough to think that he was doing this for any reason other than for his own pleasure. And yet he claimed he was doing it out of kindness?

“You're lying…” she whispered between quick breaths.

He stopped moving for a moment. The innocent way she was glaring at him made her seem even more daring. Her arms and legs, which usually just lay limp on the bed, were now wrapped tightly around him.

“I know you're lying.” With a serious expression on her face, she tightened her limbs' grip on him. “You're always lying.”

He snickered and kissed her mouth before she could say anything more, then resumed his movements. Soon he was thrusting vigorously. Wet slapping sounds rang out through the bedroom.

Perhaps she was right. Maybe he was lying. He could no longer tell what was true and what was false.

* * *

Early one morning, Layla had just finished bathing and getting dressed when she heard a knock at the cottage's front door. She opened the door and was surprised to see Claudine's maid standing there.

“I'm... sorry, Miss Llewellyn,” Marie said, lowering her head.

Layla was taken aback. From the time they were children onward, Marie had only ever treated her with scorn and contempt, but she was now displaying extreme politeness. “Why are you apologizing?” she asked. “What happened?”

“I told a lie,” Marie replied, blushing. “I said that my hand was badly injured, so that you would have to take my place and act as Miss Claudine's maid.”

Layla looked at the maid's right hand, which no longer had a bandage on it. She felt a little flustered but not surprised. She had already suspected that the injury story had been a lie. However, even if she had known earlier that it was all just Claudine's scheme, it wouldn't have changed a thing.

She had always submitted to Claudine's requests simply because Claudine was a high-ranking nobleman's daughter and would have been able to cause trouble for Uncle Bill if she hadn't complied. But now Layla was in an even more precarious position. She was having an affair with Claudine's fiancé. In a sense, she was no different from a thief. She crept through the dark of night to steal something that belonged to Claudine—her man. It didn't matter that she was stealing against her own will—stealing was stealing.

Marie maintained proper decorum throughout her whole apology, but there were a few moments when her true feelings flashed through in her eyes.

It was only after the maid left that Layla recognized what those feelings were: anger and contempt. Yes, despite the fact that the veneer of politeness Marie had put on, underneath she was clearly harboring even more hostility towards Layla than ever before.

She went to her room and sat on her bed to think. Suddenly an

unpleasant thought occurred to her: *What if Claudine knows about me and the duke?* She shuddered at the thought.

Her gaze shifted to the box on the bedside table. The duke had given it to her the previous night before he left.

He had walked to the bedroom door, taken a small box out of his coat pocket, and returned to her side. She had been reaching over the side of the bed to gather up her clothes. When she saw the box in his hand, she had pulled the covers back over her body and asked, *"What's that?"* Of course, her body was already covered with marks and stains that he had left, but in that moment, she had still felt embarrassed for him to see her naked.

*"Open it,"* he had replied, setting the box down next to her.

She had put on her glasses to look at it. It had seemed to be a jewelry box covered in red velvet. She had opened it and had been shocked to see a bird ornament. Immediately she had recalled that late-spring afternoon in Ratse when she had marveled at the crystal bird ornaments hanging from the ceiling in the passageway at the museum.

*No way.* She had stared at the crystal ornament with a puzzled look on her face, then lifted her head to look at him again. Even after staring deep into his eyes, she couldn't discern any particular emotion.

*"Why are you giving this to me?"* she had finally asked. She couldn't believe that he had remembered those ornaments from the museum.

*"You seemed to like them,"* he had replied.

This had made her all the more perplexed. She had the urge to trust him, and yet she knew from experience that this would probably lead to more pain. *If he acts like this...* She had then snapped the box shut, as if to cut off the hope she was feeling.

As she had lowered her head and caught her breath, he had moved a step closer to the bed. Not giving her time to evade his reach, he had then grabbed her chin and made her face him. Perhaps he had been curious about the expression on his mistress's

face upon receiving a gift from him.

*"No,"* she had said. It was the only reply she could give.

He had narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

*"I don't like it anymore,"* she had added.

*"…"*

*"I don't need it."*

*"…"*

*"Take it back."*

She had thought back to the moment on that spring day when she had felt like she was flying when her fingers had touched the cold, smooth surface of the crystal ornament, and then she had looked back in surprise and seen the duke's face gazing at her.

Now it was meaningless. Or rather, it had been meaningless from the start.

After looking at her face for a long while, he had let go of her chin and flatly said, *"Then throw it away."* He had then walked out of the bedroom and left the cabin.

*I should've thrown it away,* she thought. As she looked at the open box, her eyes were filled with self-loathing. She had almost smashed the ornament but hadn't been able to bring herself to do it.

*"I know that you'll become an outstanding adult."*

Her hands started shaking. She felt like she was being strangled by shame.

Just like she had done the previous night, she snapped the box shut and hid it deep under her bed.

She didn't want to see it again.

# Chapter 83:
## Not Knowing That It Was Love

Looking in the mirror, Claudine made eye contact with her maid, who was standing behind her. “I'm sorry, Marie,” she calmly said.

Startled, Marie set down the comb she was holding. “You don't need to say that, Miss Claudine. It's my fault for not behaving properly.”

“No, it was my mistake. I shouldn't have put you in that difficult situation,” Claudine said with a sigh. She then stood up from her dressing table. Having just finished getting ready to greet the crown prince and princess, she looked beautiful and elegant. Her appearance was flawless enough for her to be duchess already. “I won't forget the debt I owe you for that. I'm truly sorry. So thank you, Marie, from the bottom of my heart.”

Marie's eyes filled with tears at these heartfelt words from her mistress. She had served Claudine for many years, but this was the first time she had heard her say anything like this. She had always loved Claudine, despite her haughty, prideful personality, so it touched her deeply to see her apologizing to her and thanking her in this way.

“This is all because of Layla-”

“Don't say that, Marie,” Claudine said, cutting her off. “This is because I wasn't thinking straight before.”

Claudine then left her bedroom. There was a bit of time left before the crown prince and princess would arrive, but she didn't feel like staying holed up in her dreary room.

After walking once around the greenhouse, which was still being repaired, she went to the solarium, where the surviving plants and birds had been temporarily relocated. Just as her irritation and anger at the stupid gardener were being rekindled, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

“Have you recovered from the shame of having your dirty trick

blow up in your face, My Lady?"

She turned around, and sure enough, it was Riette. She frowned briefly at him, then laughed and sat down at the table. Thanks to the sweet scent of flowers and the sound of the birds singing, she felt much better.

"Thanks for the concern, Riette."

"You're welcome," Riette replied, grinning as he casually sat down across from her.

"Originally, I had thought that if this became a problem, it would be entirely because of Layla," she said, changing the topic. "How foolish of me, right?"

"Don't worry about it too much," he replied. "We men do all sorts of wild things when we're in love. But the feeling tends to pass by quickly."

"That's true of ordinary men. But we're not talking about any ordinary man. We're talking about Matthias von Herhardt," she said with a sigh.

Riette couldn't dispute her point. Matthias had behaved in an unexpected way that day, even if to anyone else, it would have simply looked like he was a gentleman defending his fiancée's honor after her maid had deceived her.

"Have you ever seen him show affection to anyone?" she asked, shifting her tired gaze from the clear sky beyond the glass roof to Riette. "Personally, I never have," she continued. "Not once. He's not even affectionate towards his mother."

Riette felt like she was going a bit far, but he really couldn't disagree.

"And you're trying to tell me that he's in love with a maid?" she asked.

"Technically, Layla Llewellyn is not a maid."

"What's the difference?" she retorted. Her calm tone made her words sound even colder. "I just wish I could have known about it back on the day when he lied to that police officer." Her expression darkened as she spoke.

The summer morning when the thief entered the gardener's cottage, Claudine had been on a walk by herself when she had spotted Matthias. He had seemed to be headed for his cabin by the river.

She had been gathering roses to make an arrangement but had impulsively decided to follow her fiancé instead. Matthias didn't often allow others to enter his cabin, which only made her curious about what he did there. Since she had a basket full of flowers, she had figured that if he saw her, she could just saw that she was planning to make him a bouquet.

He had walked at a faster pace than usual. Just as she was starting to have trouble keeping up with him, she had witnessed something unexpected.

He had come to a sudden stop on the riverside road. She had seen why right away. There had been a middle-aged man facing Matthias. He seemed to have come from the other direction.

Claudine had quickly ducked behind a tree. She hadn't understood why she did this at the time, but thinking back on it now, it seemed like it had been a sort of instinctual reflex.

The encounter she witnessed wasn't particularly memorable. Matthias had simply stared at the stranger, who was nervously prattling on about something. Matthias hadn't seemed to think much of it and had soon moved on. The stranger had then hurried away as well.

After thinking for a moment, Claudine had changed her mind and turned back towards the mansion. Shortly after this, word had started to spread that the money the gardener had saved up for Layla's college tuition had been stolen.

Claudine had felt sorry to hear about this but hadn't thought much about it until the morning a few days later when the police had paid a visit to Arvis. When asked if he had seen any strangers on the estate the morning of the burglary, Matthias had lied, calmly replying that he hadn't.

She wondered why he had said this, since she knew he had

encountered a stranger by the river that morning. Without understanding his motivation, she had readily become his accomplice.

Even at the time, she had had a hunch that the lie had something to do with Layla. And sure enough, the hunch had proved to be correct. The stranger had turned out to be the man who had stolen Layla's tuition money, and he had been put up to the task by Mrs. Ettman, who was desperate to stop her son from marrying Layla.

The day Claudine found this out, she laughed, hardly able to believe that the noble Duke Herhardt had lied and schemed in order to have an affair with as lowly a woman as Layla. She was especially taken aback by the fact that his scheme had amounted to keeping Layla from pursuing the life she wanted to lead. She felt a little disappointed at her fiancé for harboring the same indecent lust as other men, but she didn't especially care. After all, his mistress wasn't anyone she needed to worry about—it was just Layla. Little did she know the level of indignity that Layla would cause her to suffer.

“Don't worry, Claudine. Even if his love for her is real, he can't make her his duchess.”

Despite Riette's attempt to comfort her, Claudine remained hesitant. “Are you sure?” she muttered, knowing full well that he was right. “Yes, I suppose you're right,” she said, this time with eyes full of uneasy hope.

Riette let out a long sigh as he looked at Claudine with narrowed eyes. “If it makes you so uneasy, you should just leave him be.”

“What do you mean, Riette?”

“Don't let your fiancé realize that he is in love. Leave him alone so that he'll lose his mistress without ever realizing he was in love with her.”

“Do you really think Duke Herhardt is unaware of his own emotions?”

“If it's really love, then I'm certain he is unaware,” Riette replied, staying firm in spite of the look of doubt on Claudine's face. “He has

gone his whole life without knowing what love is. There's no way he would have been able to recognize it in himself."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, I'm serious. I'm giving you this advice for your own good: don't provoke Matthias, Claudine." Riette knew it was strange to give the woman he loved advice that would help her become his cousin's wife. He felt a little like laughing at himself, but ultimately, he just wanted Claudine to be happy. If that meant helping her marry Duke Herhardt, he was glad to oblige. "What I mean is, if you mess with Layla Llewellyn, there's a chance that Matthias will realize he's in love with her. Feelings are strange, Claudine. Once someone knows they're in love, their feelings won't stop." *Just like my feelings for you,* he wanted to add. Instead, he only smiled.

Their conversation was then cut off by the sound of someone walking down the hallway towards them.

They looked up, and saw that it was just who they expected—Duke Herhardt, dressed in formal attire. He brushed past Riette and extended his white-gloved hand to Claudine. "The crown prince is about to arrive. Let's go, My Lady." His graceful smile and dignified posture were worlds apart from the coldhearted way he had acted the day he had driven Claudine into a corner. His eyes quivered, but only for an instant.

With just as natural of a smile as her fiancé, Claudine put her hand in his. "Yes, Duke Herhardt."

Her bright, cheerful tone made Riette snicker. *They're a match made in heaven,* he thought. Shaking his head, he also rose from his seat.

The three of them joined the rest of the people lined up to greet the crown prince and princess in the mansion's main hall. It was there that Riette noticed Duke Herhardt's mistress, Layla, standing quietly at the very end of the line.

* * *

The photographers started frantically snapping pictures as soon

as the car carrying the crown prince and princess arrived.

Although the crown prince was an old friend of Duke Herhardt, this was an official visit, so there was a lot of pomp and circumstance around the arrival of the royal couple. Layla had seen many important guests visit Arvis over the years, but none of them had been met with anywhere near this level of lavish ceremony.

She stood at the end of the line of staff members, all of whom were marveling at the sights with looks of nervous excitement on their faces. Soon the duke showed up, accompanied by his fiancée, Lady Claudine. Standing with their arms linked, the couple looked completely relaxed even amid the onslaught of flashes from the photographers.

Layla stared at Duke Herhardt in a daze. He looked like an entirely different person from the man she secretly met under the cover of night. He seemed very restrained and dignified. She could find no trace of the wild man she knew. This was the persona that his lofty fiancée knew.

Layla slowly blinked in the bright winter sunlight. Matthias and Claudine walked down the red-carpeted stairs and greeted the crown prince and princess. They were too far away for Layla to hear their conversation, but even from a distance, she could tell how close they were to the royal couple—not only Duke Herhardt, but Lady Claudine as well.

As she looked at the dazzling array of badges and medals pinned to the duke's ceremonial coat, Layla unconsciously hid her hands behind her back. Her fingers had suddenly started to sting. Perhaps it was because she had used those hands to touch the shiny wings of the crystal bird ornament. Or perhaps it was because she had used them to receive the money Claudine had paid her.

She looked down at her feet. While her head was lowered, the crown prince and princess, along with their retinue, ascended the stairs. *It's all over,* she thought. Feeling some bitter relief, she peaked her head up but immediately regretted it. Claudine was looking over her shoulder, smiling straight at her.

Layla held her hands even more urgently behind her back. She almost thought she could feel the coins in her palm.

The shadows cast under the pale afternoon sunlight seemed especially long that day.

# Chapter 84:
## My Little Bird

Mrs. Graeber lived in a house just outside of the city. The recently-built neighborhood featured a clean street with neat, wooden houses on either side. It was quaint and charming.

Carrying a bouquet of flowers she had bought in the city and a jar of the jam that she had made from hand-picked fruit the previous summer, Layla walked towards the green-roofed house halfway down the street. Shortly after she rang the doorbell, Mrs. Graeber opened the door, smiling brightly. “Welcome, Miss Llewellyn! We've all been desperately awaiting your arrival!”

“Is everyone else already here?” Layla asked, looking nervously at her watch. She was ten minutes early.

“Don't worry, you're not late. Everyone was just so excited to hear you talk about the crown prince and princess, they all arrived extra early.”

With an excited smile, Mrs. Graeber led Layla to the dining room. Sitting around the table were several other young teachers with looks of anticipation identical to that on Mrs. Graeber's face.

“Did you really see His Highness the crown prince? What was he like? And what about the crown princess?”

“Was their baby with them as well? I was just reading about it in the newspaper.”

“I'm so jealous, Miss Llewellyn! We only get to see His Highness the crown prince in the newspaper. I can't believe you saw him in person!”

The flood of enthusiastic comments coming at her bewildered Layla. “I only saw His Highness very briefly, from very far away. I'm sure the picture in the newspaper gave you a much more detailed view of him,” she said, smiling awkwardly.

“Sure, but even so, nothing compares to seeing him in person!”

“That's right. By the way, Duke Herhardt and the crown prince

are close friends, aren't they?”

The conversation around the dinner table then shifted to the duke.

Layla lowered her gaze, fiddling anxiously with her water glass, as everyone else had fun weighing the relative merits of Duke Herhardt, Marquess Lindman, and the crown prince.

“The other two are great, but for me, Duke Herhardt is the clear best of the three,” Mrs. Graeber declared as she placed the last steaming dish on the table. “What do you think, Miss Llewellyn?”

Hearing her name made Layla snap out of her daze and look up. “Uh... pardon?”

“Duke Herhardt. He's the most admirable of the three men, don't you think? I certainly think so.”

“Now that I think about it, Miss Llewellyn has seen all three of them in person! So where do you land on the three of them, Miss Llewellyn?”

Layla's eyes started trembling. “Oh, um, I...” She knew they were just having a lighthearted conversation but was too flustered to know what to say.

Seeing that Layla was having trouble coming up with a response, another teacher swooped in to help her. “Come on, obviously she's on Team Duke Herhardt. He's her savior. She can't give an unbiased assessment.”

Layla felt some relief as she listened to this bland remark. As she nodded her head in agreement, the conversation shifted to the gardener's accident and the duke's generosity in forgiving him.

Layla continued smiling even as she heard them repeatedly call the duke her savior. Inside, however, it pained her heart to hear it, and this only made her hate the duke even more.

Soon, the conversation shifted to other topics, and she was able to have a good time. The food was delicious, and the company was enjoyable.

On her way home from the Graebers', she stopped by the store to get some groceries. As usual, the day's newspaper was on display by

the cash register. She glanced at it absentmindedly, then looked again with surprise.

The front page was filled with a large picture of the crown prince and Duke Herhardt smiling and shaking hands. The crown princess and Lady Claudine were standing next to them.

* * *

After a few days full of parties and banquets for the crown prince and princess, the atmosphere at Arvis calmed down. The crown prince made it clear that he was not going to attend any meetings or events until dinner. After lunch, he spent the rest of the afternoon in the duke's study with Matthias and Riette.

“Even so, I doubt that things will get that bad, Your Highness,” Riette said after listening to the crown prince's concerns about the state of affairs on the continent. He was sitting on the sofa with a casual posture but was observing utmost decorum in addressing the crown prince. “Sure, there are minor squabbles here and there, but in the end, all the kingdoms of the continent are connected by family ties.” In contrast to his calm attitude, Riette had a very serious expression on his face.

Sitting across from him, the crown prince chuckled as he flicked his cigarette's ash into the ashtray. “That may be the case, but you know, Riette, family conflicts tend to be the most fierce and ignoble of all.” He then shifted his gaze to Matthias.

Matthias was sitting deep in an easy chair, staring at the fire in the fireplace, tapping his finger on the armrest along with the waltz that was playing on the phonograph.

To someone who didn't know him, he might have appeared to be simply enjoying the music, but the crown prince had known him for a long time, and he knew that Duke Herhardt only appeared relaxed like that when he was deep in thought.

“So, Captain Herhardt,” Riette said, sitting up, “having spent time on the overseas war front, what's your opinion on all this? If a full-scale war breaks out, do you think the general consensus that we

would win is correct?"

Matthias finally turned to look at them and replied, "It wouldn't be easy." It was a dismal response, but his face and tone were infused with optimism. "If it were just a war between Berg and Lovita, we'd have a high chance of winning, but once war broke out, it would likely expand to other countries."

"Yes, that's true," the crown prince replied, letting out a worried sigh.

The tension between the continent's various kingdoms was mounting day by day. As Riette had pointed out, tracing back the family lines of the continent's ruling families would reveal that they all had blood ties to each other. However, war couldn't necessarily be avoided for such a sentimental reason. There were just too many overlapping interests. The countries of the continent were interconnected by so many alliances and treaties if two countries went to war against each other, it would quickly escalate into a full-scale continental war.

"You don't need to worry so much, Your Highness. People have had these same concerns since our fathers' fathers' generation, but the concerns never turned into reality. Even if our generation is not so lucky and full-scale war does break out, well, that's just an opportunity for us to become war heroes."

Riette's quip made the crown prince smile. "I suppose you're right. But please, Riette, stop with the Your Highness' nonsense. Talk to me like you normally do. The formality makes me feel tense."

"But Your Highness, how dare I speak casually to the crown prince when he is in the middle of a formal tour of the empire?" Riette sarcastically asked, leaning even further back in the sofa until he was practically lying horizontally.

The crown prince chuckled, and Riette broke into laughter as well. They had gotten along together like this since they were children. As time went on, each of them ascended to his own position of power, but the dynamic of their friendship never really

changed.

Matthias watched the two others laughing like little boys, then shifted his gaze out the window. It was late morning. Suddenly he saw Layla heading out on an outing somewhere. She was wearing a nice outfit. She looked pretty. Pretty enough to make him momentarily forget their upsetting last conversation.

He scoffed at the thought of a mistress who couldn't even appreciate a gift. If the point of a mistress was a pleasure, then Layla Llewellyn was a dreadful mistress. In spite of this, he had no desire to get rid of her. He didn't know why this was, nor did he care to know.

He had desired her for a long time, and now he had her. That was that. Even if she hated him, even if she found him creepy, she was his.

*She's mine,* he thought. Smiling again, he picked up his teacup. *My little bird.*

He thought of her downy, golden hair fluttering as she writhed beneath him. The better he had gotten to know her body, the more beautifully she had sung for him.

It had been several days since he had heard that moaning song of hers. As he realized this, his grip on the teacup in his hand tightened. He didn't understand how he had become so consumed by desire, but he had.

Ever since the first night that their bodies had been entangled on the cabin's drawing-room floor, all his senses had been attuned to her. The slightest hint of her would fog his mind and make his body feel hot. In such moments, she became the whole world to him. He enjoyed thinking of her so much he didn't want to stop.

*My beautiful little bird.*

By now, he had no difficulty covering his canary's eyes and clipping its little wings. As the clipped feathers fluttered to the floor, he would take the cloth off of its eyes, and it would shake its body briefly. After flapping its clipped wings, it would turn its clear, innocent eyes towards its master again and sing.

Sometimes at such moments, Matthias had the sudden urge to crush the bird in his hand, so that its life would end while it was singing its most beautiful song, just for him, and he could cherish the moment forever.

Sometimes he had a similar feeling while he was with Layla. When she wasn't rejecting him, wasn't trying to get away, but was writhing along with his movements, letting out a cry that only he could hear, in such moments he wished that time could stop and allow him to savor the feeling forever.

When he watched her squirming underneath him, with her eyes unfocused and her whole body flushed red, he sometimes found the sight so beautiful that he felt like strangling her. When she got swept up by instinctual pleasure and wrapped her limbs around him while moaning sweetly, he sometimes wished that he could devour her from head to toe.

"Matthias?"

He turned around at the sound of his name and saw Riette, with the crown prince standing next to him. When he saw the servants waiting in front of the open door, he realized that his mind had been elsewhere for a long while. It wasn't a great position to be in.

He set down his teacup and stood up as if nothing had happened. It was time to start getting ready for dinner.

Before leaving the study, he impulsively turned to look out the window one last time. He wondered if Layla had returned home yet. He laughed at himself in his mind for harping on such thoughts, when he knew full well that she had nowhere else to go in this world.

He turned around, trying to drive the idle thoughts out of his mind. He managed to walk down the hallway, which was fully of the mellow light of the setting sun, without thinking of her. However, once he reached his bedroom, her name popped into his head again. *Layla.* He had her, and yet he had the strange, unsettling feeling that she wasn't wholly his.

*What if she doesn't come back?* He ruminated on this worry as he

changed his clothes. It didn't matter that he knew she would never leave her beloved uncle Bill Remmer behind and run away. He was still worried. *Would she leave me...?* Midway through fastening his cufflinks, his hands suddenly froze. The emotion he was feeling at the prospect of her leaving him was less like anger or anxiety than perplexity. The thought seemed ridiculous and absurd. A day without the sun or a night without stars seemed more likely.

"Um, Your Grace…?" his assistant cautiously said.

Matthias finished fastening his cufflinks and turned around. While his assistant brushed off his evening jacket, he calmly looked at his reflection in the mirror and thought back to the first time he had clipped his canary's wings. That time, he had clipped the feathers too deeply. As a result, the wing had bled, and the bird had recoiled in pain. However, the bleeding had quickly stopped, and the bird was fine after that.

After that poor, beautiful bird was rendered flightless, he had cherished it even more. It was also only after having its wings clipped that it started eagerly approaching its master and singing. Even when its feathers grew back, it never tried to fly away. His bird loved its cage, and it loved him.

He stepped out of the dressing room into his bedroom and walked up to the birdcage. Sitting on its perch, the bird cocked its head and looked at him.

*If you could never fly away, I could pamper you even more. I could give you a great life. You wouldn't need a cage. I could give you so many things to enjoy.*

"It's time, Your Grace," his assistant said, looking at his watch.

Matthias nodded and looked out the window. The trees were casting long shadows on the dusky road. Layla was still nowhere in sight.

# Chapter 85:
## A Crack

Mark Evers felt slightly uneasy as he followed his master. Having started out as an ordinary servant before rising to the position of assistant to the duke, he had known Duke Herhardt for a long time, but he had never seen this behavior from him before. He seemed very distracted, even though there was a very important banquet for the crown prince and princess coming up. His mind seemed to be in a different place.

When the duke came to a sudden stop, Mark stopped as well. The duke was looking out a window halfway down the hallway. The sun was setting. The window looked out onto the forest path behind the mansion's garden.

There was someone walking down this path. It was a small-framed woman, and she was carrying something in her arms. It was Layla.

Once he had figured this out, Mark didn't hurry his master along, but just waited quietly. Matthias stayed at the window for a long while, silently gazing at the view outside. *Layla came back,* he thought to himself.

She seemed to have gone to the market. She had a large, brown-paper bag in her arms. It looked very heavy, but she was walking with her usual, brisk gait, with her head held high. *Layla came back.* As this fact was sinking in for him, his stiff shoulders relaxed.

Layla continued down the path, not looking back once. Her French braid swayed with each step. He looked at the hems of her coat and skirt flapping in the wind, and her scrawny legs underneath them. Then he looked again at her hair swaying on her back. Looking closer, he noticed that her shoulders were scrunched up as she walked. It was then that he realized how cold it was outside.

There was a bus that ran all the way to the village entrance, but

on days when Layla didn't ride her bicycle, she preferred to walk instead of riding the bus. This seemed to be the case today as well. Even while carrying that heavy load in this frigid weather.

As she walked into the distance, Matthias turned from the window and continued walking down the hallway's red carpet, to resume his designated life. However, the image of Layla walking alone down that cold, dusky path stuck in his mind for a long time. The brighter the lights inside the mansion shone, the more vivid the memory grew in his mind. The unidentifiable emotion that this memory was evoking in him felt like a thorn stuck in his throat.

As soon as he stepped into the drawing room, which was full of guests who would be attending the banquet, Claudine rushed over to greet him. “Duke Herhardt, you're here at last!” she exclaimed, casually linking arms with him.

One by one, the guests started to look at the couple.

“I was worried that something had happened,” Claudine said. “I was about to go check on you. You're never late like this.”

“I just got a little delayed in my preparations for the banquet,” he replied.

“Oh, I see. Well, that's a relief,” she replied, maintaining a relaxed smile even while so many people were looking at her.

She then rejoined the convivial atmosphere in the drawing room with perfect decorum. It was clear that she was going to make an excellent lady of the house. Matthias recognized this as well. And yet, for some reason, all of a sudden, Layla's face popped into his mind.

After watching Claudine chatting with his grandmother, mother, and the crown princess, he slowly shifted his gaze to the blazing fire in the fireplace across the room.

He still knew what a perfect marriage was. It was a marriage that would serve as a stepping stone to stabilize his world, without involving needless emotions. That was the type of marriage he had been taught to want, and it was the type he intended to get. Claudine Brandt was the perfect partner for such a marriage. He

was well aware of this. *But will she be enough for me?* he suddenly wondered.

Just as Matthias was lifting his narrowed eyes to look at the chandelier, Hessen entered to announce that the banquet was about to begin. Everyone stood up and headed with their companions to the banquet hall.

Matthias escorted Claudine down the stairs. The generator had been repaired just in time, so the large chandelier in the banquet hall, one of Arvis's sources of pride, was on full display. Underneath, the lavishly decorated banquet table awaited the guests.

Before sitting in his designated seat, Matthias looked at the mural on the high ceiling, the chandelier, and the wall covered with portraits.

As the lord of Arvis, all of this was his. And yet, his woman wasn't here. With her slender shoulders hunched, she was walking down a cold forest path towards an old, dilapidated cottage. Looking at the dazzling banquet table in front of him, he imagined Layla sitting alone at a shabby kitchen table.

Just then, Claudine called out to him. “Duke Herhardt?”

He looked at her, and she glanced at the chair in front of her.

He understood that she was waiting for him to pull the chair out from the table for her, but he didn't oblige right away. Instead, he just stood for a moment, looking at his fiancée. He had known her since they were children, and she would soon be his wife, but suddenly it felt like he was looking at a stranger. It was an odd feeling.

“Duke Herhardt?” Claudine said again, frowning slightly.

He apologized by giving a slight nod, then casually pulled out the chair for her. Relieved that he was acting like himself again, Claudine regained her smile and sat down.

It was the start of a magnificent banquet.

* * *

After a five-day stay, the crown prince and his retinue were finally going to leave. All of the Arvis staff members lined up in front of the mansion to bid them farewell. Just as with the welcome ceremony, Layla was at the very end of the line. She wasn't going to miss the increased security that she had had to deal with whenever she entered Arvis during the crown prince's stay. But still, she was disappointed that the visit was coming to an end.

Throughout the entire visit, the duke had not had her meet him at the cabin a single time. It was as if he had forgotten about her entirely. Thanks to this, she had been able to enjoy several days of peace, just like the old days. It was as if she were nothing more than Mr. Remmer's daughter.

*Maybe... he's over me,* she suddenly thought. This optimistic prospect made her heart start pounding.

As she thought about it, it occurred to her that it had been a ridiculous infatuation from the start. He had probably only wanted her because he couldn't accept that there was something in the world he couldn't have. Yes, she was sure of that now. By now, he had probably enjoyed her enough that she was no longer any fun for him. And how long could such an arrogant man stand being with a woman who hated him? Probably not long.

*This is wonderful,* she whispered to herself. It was then that the duke looked over his shoulder. Before she had time to react, their eyes met. It was only for a brief moment, but it was long enough for each of them to recognize that they were looking at each other.

She got a strange feeling and immediately lowered her eyes. After a moment, she peeked up again. The duke was facing away from her, bidding farewell to the crown prince. Claudine was standing next to him.

After the farewell ceremony concluded and the crown prince and his retinue departed from Arvis, the duke escorted Claudine into the mansion. Sighs of relief could be heard from staff members all over.

“I think it was a mistake for them to postpone the wedding. Just look—Miss Claudine already looks like a duchess,” a nearby maid

whispered.

While the other maids were voicing their agreement, Layla turned around and left.

As she reached the forest path leading back to the cottage, her heart started beating faster. The mere thought that she might soon be free of that man made her feel like shackles had been removed from her ankles.

Once the duke got married, she wanted to leave Arvis with Uncle Bill and move somewhere far away, far enough for the duke to forget about them. Once there, they could have a fresh start at life. She didn't mind if they would never be able to go back to the life they had led before. She would just have to try as hard as she could, and then maybe the nightmare that the duke had created for her would turn into a distant memory.

Excited by this hopeful thought, she moved faster and more confidently than usual. After doing the laundry and cleaning the house, she baked some jam cookies. There had been a special one-day-only sale on flour, so she had bought a large quantity of it. Carrying such a heavy load home in the cold had been quite hard, but she forgot all the effort when she pulled the baking sheet of perfectly-browned cookies out of the oven.

She had a leisurely day at the cottage. After eating a whole plateful of the cookies she had baked, she read a book for a while, and then responded to some letters that friends had sent her. Just as she was sealing the last letter in an envelope, she heard a loud, friendly voice outside.

“Layla!” It was her kind, chatty neighbor Chef Mona.

“Yes, Chef Mona!” she replied, running to the front door to greet her.

Whenever there had been a big party at the mansion, Mona would always come to the cottage carrying a huge basket full of leftover food. Today was no different.

Stepping into the kitchen, she took a deep breath of the sweet, cookie-scented air and smiled. “With Bill still out of town, I was

worried if you were eating enough, but I see that you're now a mature young woman."

"It's all thanks to you, Chef Mona," Layla replied, taking the basket and setting it down on the table. While she made tea, Mona sat down and looked around the kitchen.

It was Mona who had taught Layla how to cook. From the time when Layla was a little girl with tiny hands, she followed Mona's instruction so well that it didn't take long for her to become a skilled homemaker. The cottage's kitchen had been a source of delicious meals ever since.

With tea and sweet treats on the table between them, Layla and Mona sat and chatted like normal. Mona did most of the talking, while Layla mostly smiled and nodded.

"You did a great job with these cookies! I think you're ready to get married now," Mona exclaimed with some slight exaggeration. "Oh, Layla, while we're on the subject, did you and Kyle end up-"

"I've gotten good at baking cakes, too, Chef Mona," Layla quickly said, cutting Mona off before she could change the subject. "Next time I make one, I'd like you to taste it and critique my work." Her tone was so serious you'd think that cake baking was the most important thing in the world.

"I'll be sure to pay you a visit next time you make one!" Mona said. She was disappointed that Layla didn't want to talk about Kyle, but she decided not to press her on it. Ever since Kyle had returned to Karlsbar, all of the Arvis staff had been wondering about him and Layla. Even so, she didn't want to reopen an old wound for her.

Instead, she started telling Layla all about the busy week she had had cooking for not only the crown prince and princess, but all the fastidious aristocrats that came to see them as well. It was clear from her heated tone that she had a lot of built-up irritation. "And just when I thought I'd finally be getting a break, I heard that Lady Claudine is staying here. What's with that? Why does she need to stay at Arvis when her fiancé will be gone?"

“The duke left again?” Layla cautiously asked.

After eating two cookies in a row, Mona casually nodded. “Yeah. What was it for again? I think a business matter came up. Anyway, he's going to have to spend a few days in a neighboring city taking care of it. After the crown prince left this morning, the duke had a quick lunch and then left right away.”

Layla's face started to flush with excitement.

Mona didn't know what she was so excited about, but rather than dwelling on it, she continued talking. “So anyway, Lady Claudine is staying at Arvis while he's away. They say it's so that she can discuss wedding plans with the duke's mom and grandma, but I think that's just an excuse those women made up because they adore her and want to spend more time with her. But now I'm in the hot seat. I've never cooked for such a picky eater!”

After getting her frustrations thoroughly off her chest, Mona left the cottage.

Layla locked the windows and door, then returned to the kitchen table and sat down. There was still a cookie left on Mona's plate. She picked it up and took a bite. The sound of her chewing filled the silent kitchen.

The relief she felt at the prospect of more peaceful days ahead was just as sweet as the taste of the cookie. *I'm so happy,* she thought, wiping the crumbs from her mouth with the back of her hand. *This is wonderful.*

# Chapter 86:
## Arvis's Child

All the meetings for Matthias's business trip, which had been expected to take at least four days, were wrapped up after only three days.

Leaning back into a chair in the hotel lobby, Mark Evers let out an exhausted sigh. He had worked without rest for the previous three days, contacting people and moving meetings around. This lunch meeting was the last piece of official business on the trip.

Mark lifted his tired face and stared out the window. A deluge of invitations from the city's most prominent businessmen and aristocrats had come in, but the duke had made sure that there were no meetings scheduled for the final day of his trip. It didn't take Mark long to realize what the duke intended to spend the free time on: Layla.

That morning, the duke had summoned Mark and told him to send a car to Arvis to pick up Layla and bring her to him. That was the extent of the duke's command, but Mark also understood why the duke wanted Layla brought to him. Looking at his watch, he realized that the car was probably just about to arrive at Arvis.

Sometimes he wondered how much longer it would be possible to keep the duke's affair a secret. No matter how simple-minded Bill Remmer was, it seemed only a matter of time before he would figure out that something untoward was going on with his beloved adopted daughter. The same went for the duke's mother and grandmother, and for Lady Claudine.

However, he felt silly for worrying about this when he considered the way the duke had been behaving recently. Basically, the duke had been acting like he didn't care about hiding the affair at all. Granted, it wasn't uncommon for men to be seen in public with their mistresses, but it was a different matter when the man was as prominent a figure as Duke Herhardt. He couldn't believe the duke

was so blithely engaging in behavior that could damage his spotless reputation. It was something the Duke Herhardt he had come to know would have never done.

Of course, it wasn't the duke that he was really worried about. The person who would be hurt most if a scandal were to break out was Layla. *If he no longer intends to keep the affair a secret, what's his plan for her?* he wondered.

His eyes wandered around the hotel lobby in which he was sitting, traveling from the ornate, gold-plated pillars, to the marble statues, before settling on the rows of potted plants, which had fresh green leaves even though it was the dead of winter.

Mark was not close friends with Bill Remmer, who was old enough to be his father, but he knew that the gardener was well-liked by most everyone among Arvis's staff, as was Layla.

The House of Herhardt's staff members often referred to Layla as *Arvis's child.* Perhaps it was a bombastic way to describe an orphan girl who had been taken in and raised by the estate's gardener, but somehow it felt natural to everyone. And this was true even though she was not the only child raised by a member of Arvis's staff.

Reflecting on this, Mark wondered if it was because no other staff member's child was as universally beloved as Layla was. Throughout her childhood, everyone saw her frolicking through the estate's garden, forest, and riverside. When you encountered her running around the flowery garden, or the lush forest, it was like a fairy was brushing past you.

Everyone had expected her to marry someone nice, like Kyle, and live happily ever after. But it seemed that things weren't turning out so well for her. Of course, by helping the duke, Mark was partly to blame for this, so he felt silly for pitying her.

He remembered the weighty advice Hessen had given him on the day he was appointed to the position of the duke's assistant: *"Remember, Evers, It's not our place to judge."*

Mark understood exactly what this meant. He was to carry out the duke's will by following whatever orders he was given.

Anything beyond that would be overstepping his authority.

As he finished reflecting on this, a group of men walked out into the lobby. It seemed that the lunch had concluded.

He quickly stood up and rushed to the duke's side. From a distance, no one would have been able to tell that the duke had just concluded three days of back-to-back meetings—he looked impeccable. Up close, however, Mark could see the fatigue on his face.

“The car left before lunch,” Mark said. “It should arrive back here around teatime.”

The duke nodded. Mark noticed there were bags under his eyes.

“Once the car arrives, I will bring her to your room. Until then, perhaps you would like to get some rest, Your Grace?” Mark cautiously asked.

“Sure,” the duke replied. After bidding his lunch companions farewell, he went to his room.

As usual, Mark followed a few steps behind him. He was sure that the duke was exhausted, but he noticed that he was walking with perfect posture, and a relaxed, dignified gait.

The various thoughts he had been having about Layla were making Mark uneasy. Duke Herhardt was just Duke Herhardt. That name and title were infused into every aspect of his life. It saddened Mark to contemplate what someone like Layla Llewellyn meant to a man like that.

“Ah, Evers,” the duke said as they arrived at the door of his room, “I have one more request for you.”

* * *

Layla bore a cold expression on her face as she looked out the window of the stopped car. She wasn't surprised that they had arrived in front of a hotel, but she didn't want to get out.

“Uh... Layla?” The chauffeur said, looking worriedly at his watch.

When Mark Evers had delivered the duke's order to him, he had emphasized that he needed to bring Layla as quickly as possible. He

had complied with this order by driving faster than usual back to Karlsbar.

However, Layla was a variable he hadn't accounted for. He spent a worryingly long amount of time arguing with her in front of the cottage. She seemed determined not to go. If it hadn't been for the letter from the duke, he might not have been able to fulfill his duty.

He was very curious about what could have possibly been in that letter that made that stubborn girl change her mind so quickly. However, he couldn't dwell on his curiosity for very long. He had made the trip to Karlsbar quickly enough that they weren't going to be late, but he was still worried. He had been ordered to bring Layla to the duke as quickly as possible, after all.

“Layla?” he said, this time with a voice full of concern.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Krug,” Layla quietly replied as she opened the passenger door.

The chauffeur hurried out of the car and rushed around to her side, worried that she might try to run away. Luckily, she was standing in place, looking up at the hotel.

“Mr. Krug!” Mark Evers shouted, running towards them. “Why are you so late? It’s already…” He trailed off and stared, mouth agape.

Despite the extreme cold, Layla was only wearing a thin shawl without a jacket. More shocking than this, however, was the soot-covered apron she had on.

*Oh my goodness,* Mark thought.

When the chauffeur saw the shocked expression on Mark's face, he averted his eyes.

Mark cautiously spoke to Layla, saying, “Miss Llewellyn, first of all, you'd better change your clo-”

“Is this the place?” she asked, cutting him off. She was looking at the hotel with a stubborn look in her eyes. “This is the place I'm supposed to go, right?”

“Yes, it is, but-”

“Then I'll head in right now.” She immediately started

confidently striding towards the hotel's entrance.

*She's going in looking like that?* Mark thought, watching her in disbelief.

Upon seeing her, the doorman flinched, then looked awkwardly at Mark. Normally he would have denied entry to someone dressed as sloppily as Layla was, but he didn't want to get in the way of anything having to do with Duke Herhardt.

Mark hurriedly took off his coat and draped it over her shoulders. She would likely still attract questioning looks, but at least she would be allowed inside now.

Still looking uncomfortable, the doorman reluctantly opened the door for them. Once they were inside the hotel's resplendent lobby, Layla stood out even more. She flinched slightly upon seeing the lavish interior, but kept walking confidently, as if nothing was wrong. Trying his best to ignore the onlookers staring at them, Mark gracefully escorted her.

* * *

“Your Grace? It's me, Evers,” Matthias's assistant said after knocking. When no response came, he spoke a little louder but just as politely: “Your Grace?”

Matthias, who was slumped back on the sofa, finally opened his eyes. “Come in.” He sounded sleepy. As he sat up and rubbed his face to wake himself up, the door opened. He looked up and saw Layla standing in the doorway with a man's coat wrapped around her.

“I'll be going now,” Mark said, feeling anxious to leave as quickly as possible. He had done his duty by bringing Layla here. Whatever happened to her after this was not his concern. Just as he was turning to leave, he heard a kind voice.

“Oh, Mr. Evers.” It was Layla. She was holding his coat. With utmost politeness, she walked up to him and held out the coat. “Thanks for this.”

“You're welcome, Miss Llewellyn,” he replied, smiling. He then

left the room.

Once he was gone, she reluctantly turned around. The duke, who had been watching her, slowly furrowed his brow.

“Sorry if you're displeased with my appearance,” she said, “but there was nothing I could do. I was cleaning out the fireplace when your driver came.” She was blushing, and her voice was shaking slightly, but she maintained a confident posture and kept her eyes fixed on his. “You ordered him to bring me to you as fast as possible, so this is what you get.”

Sitting on the sofa with his chin resting in his palm, he looked closely at her. Her French braid had come partly undone. The most shocking thing was her soot-covered apron, but even the clothes she had on under it were inappropriate for the setting.

She was wearing a wrinkled brown dress, woolen socks, and worn-out leather boots covered with marks and scratches. As he slowly observed each item in her outfit, a snicker escaped his lips. She flinched. Laughter wasn't the reaction she had expected.

He lazily stood up and walked towards her, stopping about one step away from her. “I really like this side of you, Layla.”

From up close, her face looked especially radiant. There was a fierce look in her eyes, but as always, this pleased him most of all.

“You're always full of surprises,” he said. “It's so much fun.”

“Fun? You find this *fun*?” She held out the crumpled-up letter, which she had been clutching during the entire trip.

He glanced at it, then casually nodded. “Yes, I do.” He gently caressed her blushing cheek. “You look pretty.”

Her eyes were full of unconcealed anger as she glared at his smiling face. However, he barely noticed what emotion her eyes contained—seeing them up close for the first time in several days, he was overcome by their beauty.

“Don't touch me!” She pushed his hand away and took a step back. As she did so, she dropped the crumpled letter, and it fell to the carpet. Not wanting to seem flustered, she raised her head confidently and looked the duke straight in the eye. “How can you

smile and say things like that after threatening me like you did?”

“Threatening you?” he asked, glancing at the letter on the floor.

His innocent attitude exasperated her even more. “Yes! You threatened me! In that nasty letter that you sent!”

# Chapter 87:
## Our Rule

“Ah, that,” Matthias casually replied. He then put his hand on Layla's cheek again, this time more forcefully. “You can't call that a threat, Layla.”

“If it's not a threat, what is it?”

“Perhaps you could call it... a piece of advice?” he replied in an innocent tone.

She glared at him angrily.

Just that morning, she had been in such a good mood. The clear, blue winter sky was beautiful, and the cold forest air was crisp and refreshing. Most of all, she had been delighted that it was another day without the duke.

After staying away from her through the duration of the crown prince's visit, he had gone on a business trip without saying a thing. It was really starting to seem like he was over her.

Feeling like she had finally returned to her normal life, she had hummed joyously as she stared her daily chores. She had gone into the woods to gather dry wood for kindling and had baked a loaf of bread. She had then decided to clean out the fireplace. Just as she was in the middle of that, an unwanted visitor had arrived.

At first, she had thought she was seeing things. The duke was in another city, so it didn't make any sense that his chauffeur would be at the cottage looking for her. She had blinked a few times before realizing that it was definitely him.

*“The duke needs to see you, Layla,”* he had said in an embarrassed but firm tone of voice. *“I've been ordered to come and pick you up right away.”*

*“Pick me up and take me where?”*

*“Where do you think? To where His Grace is.”*

*“No,”* she had replied, shaking her head. *“I don't want to go. I'm not going with you.”*

Even after saying this, she had known it was not over. She felt desperate and humiliated. She felt like she was the duke's plaything and had to go where he said, when he said it. This was how their relationship had been from the start, but it pained her heart much more that he was letting other people know about it now. Thus, she was determined not to take a single step towards the car. Her determination remained firm until she read the threatening letter the duke had sent.

Enclosed in a wax-sealed envelope, the letter had consisted of just one short sentence: *Think about Mr. Remmer.* Despite its brevity, the letter had succeeded in conveying the duke's threatening intentions.

After crumpling up the letter, she had slowly walked to the car like an animal being led to the slaughterhouse. Her only solace came from the fact that she was covered in soot. But now, even that was negated by the duke's laughter.

“Don't you care about honor?” she asked. “About decency? About dignity? I thought that noblemen like you value those things above all else. If that's the case, then how could you use Uncle Bill to threaten me?”

He didn't waver in the face of her grilling. “I knew that if I hadn't given you that advice, you probably wouldn't have come.”

His flat tone made her feel even more frustrated. Holding her face with both his hands now, he stared intently at her face with his blue eyes.

“I see. How gentlemanly of you,” she said, trying to irritate him with sarcasm.

Unfortunately, her snide remark only made him chuckle. “And you certainly look like a proper lady today as well,” he said, looking her up and down. “So, I guess things are even between us. Isn't that right, Layla?”

Since he was holding on to her too firmly for her to be able to get away, she contemplated stomping on his foot.

Before she could, however, there was a knock on the door. She jumped at the sound, but he seemed to have expected the visitor

and calmly said, “Come in.”

The door opened, and a maid walked in, pushing a cart with a tray on it.

Layla jumped in surprise and backed away towards the window. The maid looked confused for a moment, then smiled warmly and proceeded to move various items from the tray to the dining table.

Once the maid had left, Layla asked, “What is that?”

The table was set with a sumptuous afternoon tea. What especially surprised her was that it appeared to be a setting for one.

“It's just what it looks like,” he calmly replied, checking his watch.

Among the refreshments in the tea setting was a delicious-looking piece of cake topped with pink whipped cream. It seemed that Mark Evers had followed his master's order to the letter.

“Eat,” Matthias said.

“Wh-why should I?”

“And wake me up in two hours.”

“What...?”

He lay down on the long sofa and closed his eyes.

After staring at him for a moment, she asked, “What are you doing?”

“There's an elegant lady visiting me, so I'm treating her the way a lady should be treated,” he replied, his eyes still closed.

“What if I told you I didn't want to be your lady?”

“That would be even better.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you're not a lady, then I have no obligation to be a gentleman,” he replied, sounding more languid with each word. “That's our rule, isn't it?”

He slowly turned to look at her. When their eyes met, her heart sank, and her whole body stiffened up even more.

“Why are you standing right next to the sofa like that?” he asked. “Are you going to kill me in my sleep or something?”

“I'm thinking about it.”

“Make sure you finish the job, then,” he drowsily said, closing his eyes again. “If you don't, it'll be my turn next.”

She looked at him incredulously. Most of this wild man's behavior was beyond her understanding, but this was extreme even for him. He had forced her to come by sending a threatening letter and then had presented her with a lovely afternoon tea and casually fallen asleep.

Amazingly, he was really asleep. Hearing his quiet, regular breaths, she squinted at him and adjusted her glasses. As hard as it was to believe, he was asleep.

* * *

“I think you should go check on Layla, Marie,” Claudine said, setting down her embroidery hoop.

The maid's eyes widened. “Is something going on with her again, Miss?”

“No, it's nothing like that,” Claudine replied. There was a smile on her lips, but her eyes looked cold and serious.

She found it very strange that after Matthias had embarrassed her for making Layla act as her maid, he had completely ignored Layla for several days. If he was already over Layla, then why had he gone to such lengths to defend her?

“Tell her that I'd like to apologize for what happened over a cup of tea.”

“But Miss, do you really need to-”

“Go, Marie,” Claudine said, cutting her off with a friendly tone.

Marie shut her mouth and went off to fulfill the command.

While she waited for her maid to return, Claudine resumed her embroidery. She never knew what was going on inside Matthias's head, but Layla was different. She felt that Layla's intentions were always clear. She was confident that if she just talked to her, she would be able to figure everything out. However, Marie came back with surprising news: “It doesn't seem like anyone is home at Layla's cottage, Miss.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I kept calling for her, but there was no response,” Marie replied, cautiously looking up to see the expression on Claudine's face.

Claudine was lost in thought for a moment, then flashed a carefree smile and said, “She must have gone on an outing. Can you go try again in a little bit?”

“Is it really important that you see her today, Miss?”

“Yes,” Claudine firmly replied, “it seems that it is.” She tried to ignore the unpleasant thought that popped into her mind. *He wouldn't dare do that... would he?*

* * *

Layla opened her eyes and found herself surrounded by darkness. The two hours that the duke had wanted to nap for had long since passed. After watching him sleeping for a while, she had fallen asleep herself.

After vacillating for a moment about what to do, she silently got up and switched on the desk lamp next to the sofa. The soft light it gave off illuminated the sleeping duke's face. When he was awake, he moved as quietly and smoothly as a cat, but now that he was asleep, he didn't toss or turn at all.

Looking at the clock on the wall, she considered waking him up, but ultimately decided to let him keep sleeping.

Nothing good came from the duke when he was awake. She didn't want to disturb the peacefulness of having him asleep.

Finally taking off the soot-covered apron she had stubbornly left on, she rubbed her stiff shoulders and looked around the room. When she saw the tea and refreshments that she hadn't touched, she suddenly felt hungry. It then occurred to her that she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, which she had eaten earlier than normal. She considered sneaking out and buying food somewhere, but then she remembered that she was in an unfamiliar city, and she hadn't brought any money with her.

*Even so... I don't want to wake him.*

Glancing at him, she fell into deliberation again. She was a little curious why he had wanted her to wake him after two hours, but she decided not to dwell on it.

She needed to avoid thinking about him whenever possible. That was the only way she could keep her wits in the midst of this miserable relationship with him.

She found an acceptable compromise in the piece of cake on the table. She didn't want to get swept up by the duke, but eating the cake seemed preferable to waking him up with the sound of her stomach growling.

Trying her hardest not to make a sound, she tiptoed to the table and picked up the plate with the cake on it. Even as she started to take small, cautious bites of the cake, she kept her eyes fixed on the sleeping duke. After finishing about half of the cake slice, she carefully set the plate down on the table. Just then, he stirred in his sleep. Luckily, he didn't open his eyes, but the surprise caused her to drop the fork she was holding.

As she stared at the fork sitting on the floor directly under where his head was lying on the sofa, she let out a silent sigh at the pathetic situation she was in—she had been suddenly picked up and driven to a distant location and was now nervously trying to assuage her hunger.

She shook her head to get rid of her self-pity, then carefully stepped towards the sofa and reached out to pick up the fork. Just as her hand made contact with it, Matthias woke up.

Through his still-bleary eyes, he could see that the room was dark, and Layla was stooped over next to him. It didn't take him long to realize that night had fallen. He wondered why he was only now waking up.

Narrowing his eyes, he reached out and grabbed her slender wrist. She let out a surprised yelp and dropped the fork again. Looking up, she saw that the duke was awake, and had a serious look in his eyes.

Rather than asking her what she was doing, he just stared at her. Fidgeting like a child who had just been caught being naughty, she shut her mouth and turned her head away from him.

He was used to this sort of resistance from her, but for some reason, it seemed especially ridiculous to him this time.

When she tried to shake his hand off her wrist, he forcefully pulled her towards him. She staggered for a moment, then fell onto his chest.

She tried screaming and flailing, but she couldn't get away. Before she knew it, she was lying on the sofa with him firmly on top of her. All that she could see was his face staring down at her. She tried to look away, but he wouldn't let her.

# Chapter 88:
## The Duchess

*Why does he always catch me when I most want to hide?* Feeling like she was about to cry, Layla met the duke's unavoidable gaze. She thought about speaking, then changed her mind. It pained her heart too much to think about the way she had just been acting—she felt like a mouse hiding in an attic.

However, Matthias found out what she was trying to hide right away. Looking back and forth between the dropped fork and the slice of cake on the plate, he quietly laughed.

He had already sensed that she had been sneaking around doing something, and now he saw that she had been eating the cake. That single fact made all the irritation he had previously felt go away. He no longer minded all the days he had spent thinking about her without knowing why; he no longer minded that he had foolishly had several meetings rescheduled so that he could spend a day alone with her; he no longer minded that he had gone as far as to request a special meal for her to eat. Simply by eating that slice of cake, she had made all those things feel worth it.

Rather than asking why she hadn't woken him at the time he had asked her to, he gave her a peck on her tightly shut lips. He hadn't had any grand plans for the two of them.

He had simply wanted to go on a walk together, have tea together, and eat dinner together—an ordinary evening. He had gone to the ridiculous length of having his mistress brought to the location of his business trip, just for that.

Rather than awkwardly asking her if she disliked spending time with him, he simply kissed her again. Her lips had the sweet taste of cake on them.

What started as a quick peck soon developed into a full-on kiss. As soon as he wrapped his arms around her warm body, he realized how strong his desire for her had been during the time he hadn't

been able to see her. Having her in his arms at that moment thus felt like the most natural thing in the world. Layla Llewellyn was the only woman in the world who could make him feel this way. She was exactly what he wanted. Not just any woman, but Layla. His little bird, Layla Llewellyn.

Breathing heavily, he looked up. Her eyes were shut, and her face was faintly blushing. He found this so cute, he snickered.

*Why is he laughing?* she wondered, but she didn't dare open her eyes. She intended to keep her eyes shut like a corpse and hoped that he would finish quickly. That was what she wanted.

But he wasn't acting how he usually did. Instead of greedily fondling her and getting down to business right away, he simply kissed her again. After giving her a few gentle pecks on her cheeks and nose, his lips moved to her ear. Her eyes shot open at the loud sound of his quick, moist breathing.

“D-don't,” she said, using all her strength to try to push him away. “Just... do it like you usually do. Please.” She had made this request impulsively, but it was sincere.

He stared at her for a moment, then responded by putting his mouth over her entire, reddened ear.

Soon the sound of his heavy breathing was mingled with the sound of her moaning.

* * *

Ever since the summer when she was thirteen years old, Claudine von Brandt had already thought of herself as Duchess Herhardt. As she lay on the bed of the Arvis guestroom and stared at the ceiling, her mind transported her back to that time in her life.

It wasn't her first time visiting the Herhardt estate, but this time, her mother had taken extra care to dress her up in an especially pretty outfit.

“You're not a little girl anymore. Now you're a lady, and you have to act like one. Do you understand, Claudine?” Countess Brandt asked her daughter as they rode in a carriage headed towards Arvis.

Claudine noticed that her mother's eyes were full of life, instead of helplessness or tears like usual.

It was a few days after arriving at Arvis that she came to understand what her mother had meant by “lady.” She was young, but she was quick-witted and perceptive, and the adults around her weren't trying to hide the fact that they were setting her and Matthias up together.

One night, a week after arriving at Arvis, she directly asked her mother, “Are Matthias and I going to get married?”

Taken aback by the abrupt question, Countess Brandt made sure that the door to their room was locked, then returned to Claudine and replied, “That's what the grownups want, but to make sure it happens, you'll have to work really hard to show the Herhardt family how much better of a duchess you'll make than any of the other young ladies they're considering.”

“I'm much smarter than my friends, Mother. All my teachers say that. My etiquette teacher, my dance teacher, all of them.”

“Sure, I know that, honey. But that's not the only important thing. You need to get close to Matthias and spend a lot of time with him. That's the most important thing of all.”

In an instant, Claudine lost her confident attitude and seemed nervous. “Oh...”

Unlike other boys his age, Matthias had already inherited his aristocratic title from his late father and was head of the House of Herhardt. He was an object of envy among the girls in high society, including girls Claudine's age who hadn't come of age yet. Thus, it wasn't that she disliked him.

She had never seen a boy as good-looking as him. Sometimes her friends would joke that of all the precious works of art owned by the Herhardt family, the greatest masterpiece was their heir, Matthias. Although it was a joke, it wasn't far from the truth.

However, it seemed like it would be hard to be happy around him. He was already almost fully grown, so it was natural that he wouldn't have paid much attention to a younger girl like her. But

even setting that aside, she always felt like he was especially distant. He always treated her with utmost courtesy, and yet somehow, when she was with him, she felt like she was invisible.

“Claudine, I want you to become the greatest noblewoman in the whole Berg Empire, so that everyone can see that even though the Brandt family's only child is a daughter, she's greater than any run-of-the-mill son,” Countess Brandt said.

“If I become Duchess Herhardt, will I be the greatest noblewoman in the empire?”

Countess Brandt's face lit up. “Of course, Claudine! You'll be the lady of the house of the greatest family in the empire. And you'll be the mother of that family's heir.”

“Does that mean Arvis will be mine?”

“Yes it does. All of this will be yours.”

Claudine sank into thought for a moment, then scurried over to the window and stood before it. She looked out onto the garden full of colorful roses, the magnificent fountain, and the vast tract of land beyond it.

“I love it,” she said, beaming. “I'll try my hardest, Mother.”

She had done her best to keep that promise, and the day when the dream would become a reality was now fast approaching.

*How dare that woman get in the way?*

She tossed and turned for a while, unable to sleep, then finally gave up and got out of bed and paced around the room with unusually anxious steps.

Her fiancé was enamored with that orphan. She realized that she had to acknowledge that fact. Duke Herhardt had demonstrated it to her directly.

Layla still hadn't returned to the cottage by late at night. It was obvious where she was, and who she was with. Marie tried to calm Claudine down by telling her that she was overreacting and imagining things, but Claudine was certain. Matthias had taken her away.

*Layla Llewellyn... Have I really put up with Matthias's coldhearted*

*treatment for all these years just to be humiliated by someone as lowly as her?* Her hands clenched into fists and started shaking.

If it were just a matter of him showing some mild affection to his mistress, she could have put up with it. It would have been irritating but tolerable. After all, she didn't care about receiving affection from him. That wasn't why she was marrying him. What she wanted from Matthias was a stable family life and a son. That was all. Matthias felt the same. That was why they had gotten engaged.

But now, Claudine felt an ever-growing premonition that this future was being threatened.

She thought back to the unusual way Matthias had behaved on the night of the crown prince and princess's farewell banquet. It was only for a moment, but she had felt like she was looking at a complete stranger. He had never shown her any affection, but at least she had always felt that they shared the same goals. At that moment, however, she had no longer felt that.

The Duke Herhardt that she and everyone else knew would never ruin his marriage for the sake of a lowly mistress. But what use was any of that? He was no longer the Duke Herhardt she knew.

She had to stop him before he realized the feelings he had for Layla.

Just like on the day when she had first decided she was going to become Duchess Herhardt, she went to the large window that looked out onto the garden and drew open the curtains resolutely.

Matthias von Herhardt had to become her husband. The one and only reward she would accept for the life she had lived up to then was to become duchess.

As she stared at the dark, wintry garden, her eyes regained their liveliness.

If Matthias wasn't going to give Layla up, then Layla would have to leave. Of course, she knew better than to do something that would provoke Matthias again. Layla needed to disappear from their lives quietly, without a trace.

She contemplated how to break Layla's spirit enough for that to happen. After thinking for a while, she muttered, “Kyle Ettman...”

A dark smile appeared on her face.

* * *

Layla awoke to see a sleeping man's face. Still groggy, she stared at him as if transfixed by sight. She could see the smooth, well-defined lines of his chin and nose even in the darkness. His pale skin made the red of his lips stand out. It was a very handsome, dignified face.

As she was lost in thought, a faint smile formed on her lips as she realized she recognized the face.

It was the duke. The man who had visited her school. The frightening but handsome man that she sometimes encountered in the woods.

And yet, something was strange. In her memory, his appearance seemed to have been softer and more childlike than he looked now.

She took her hand out from under the covers and tried touching his face. It was warm. This was strange as well. She slowly blinked as she wondered if it was possible to feel warmth in a dream.

Meanwhile, her vision became clearer, as did her mind. Soon she realized that she was not in her room at home, and then she quickly remembered where she was.

She shook her head and jerked her hand away from the duke's face. She didn't like that she was lying next to him face-to-face, but he had his arms around her back and his legs intertwined with hers, so she couldn't get away.

She tried struggling for a moment, then gave up. As she continued to wake up, memories from the previous night started to pop into her head.

Not wanting to sleep in the same bed as him, she had gotten out of bed a few times. Each time she did, he had soon lunged at her like a wild beast.

That was really how he had seemed to her. Instead of just going

after her out of greed like normal, he had seemed almost pathologically fixated on her. Ultimately, she hadn't been able to push him away. Her last memory from the night was the sound of her name being muttered amid the sound of the bed creaking.

Not wanting a repeat of that, she remained in his embrace. She tried closing her eyes, but she couldn't get back to sleep, so she opened them again and stared at him.

At first, she thought that he looked no different from the first time she had seen him, but gradually she realized that this wasn't the case. His facial features looked the same, but his frame looked firmer and more defined.

She still vividly remembered riding to Arvis in the mail coach, but it suddenly struck her that quite a long time had passed since then.

As she stared into space and pictured the scrawny little girl that she had been all those years ago, the sun started to rise. When she looked at Matthias again, she let out a faint yelp.

Staring back at her was a pair of eyes the same color as the early-dawn sky.

# Chapter 89:
## It Was Very Strange

As she gazed at his eyes, she was reminded of the first time she saw them. This made her feel strange again, so she tried to look away, but he wouldn't let her. As she felt the strength of his grip on her face, her eyes started quivering nervously.

However, there was no repeat of what had happened the previous night. He just gazed back into her eyes as they lay facing each other. His hands remained holding her cheeks, but he softened his grip. There was utter silence in the room, other than the faint sound of them breathing. Gradually the look in his eyes grew in intensity.

*But... why?* she wondered, cocking her head.

Making no reaction to her look of confusion, he continued to stare at her face, as if he was searching for something. Not wanting to provoke him, she endured this for a while, then she started to look back at him more intently.

As they stared searchingly at each other, the winter morning continued to brighten outside. A sliver of sunlight leaked through a crack in the curtains and landed on her cheek, which he reached out and caressed. Her large eyes shone beautifully. Filled with a mix of fear and curiosity, they looked like the eyes of a newborn animal.

Suddenly feeling slightly dejected, he let out a sigh, then laughed again. He moved his hand from her blushing cheek to her hair and started caressing it. She narrowed her eyes at him. Her body felt unbelievably soft and smooth as she struggled in his embrace.

“I'm... hungry!” she urgently exclaimed as his hand reached her bare shoulder.

“What?” he asked, furrowing his brow slightly.

“I'm really hungry,” she muttered, lowering her eyes in belated embarrassment while firmly pushing his hand away.

She really was hungry. As silly as she felt telling him this, she found it preferable to doing something indecent with him again.

“I n-need to eat breakfast,” she said more firmly. She was blushing with embarrassment, but she had an earnest look on her face.

When he remained silent, she feared that she had provoked him again. However, after a moment, he let out a chuckle that sounded nothing like him.

Bewildered by the sound, she looked up. He was lying on his back, laughing.

*Am I that comical to him?* she wondered, blushing. She pulled the covers up over her bare chest and shoulders.

Meanwhile, he sat up and leaned against the cushioned headboard. The pale winter sunlight surrounded him as he laughed and swept his hair back from his brow. His smooth, firm body reminded her of the marble statues in the mansion.

Their eyes met. “Of course. Let's have breakfast,” he replied, laughing.

She felt that she should look away, but she couldn't help but keep staring at him. His long eyelashes cast attractive shadows under his half-opened blue eyes.

Seeing him laugh like that made her feel even stranger. He looked like an ordinary man. Not a lofty aristocrat with the world at his fingertips, but just a normal young man.

While she was thinking about this, he got out of bed. She gasped and pulled the covers up over her head. From under the covers, she could hear him laughing mischievously.

It was so strange hearing him laugh like that, she felt like shutting her eyes even though she was under the covers. It was very strange.

* * *

Kyle took a few deep breaths, then stepped through the door than the doorman was holding open for him. The luxurious café, located at the heart of downtown Karlsbar, was full of gentlemen and noblewomen enjoying their afternoons.

Claudine was waiting at a table on the second floor, which had a large window looking out onto the park and the row of expensive shops down below. It was less busy than the first floor, but it could hardly be called a private location.

“You came,” she said, nodding but not standing to greet him when he arrived at her table. “You're a little late. I thought I'd been stood up.” Despite her smiling face, her tone was cold.

“Why did you want to meet?” he asked in a stiff, serious tone.

She pointed to the seat across from her. “Sit down first. There's a lot of people here who can see us.”

“That makes me wonder why you wanted to meet here, of all places.”

She didn't bat an eye at his frustrated remark. “Trust me, this is exactly the type of place where we should be meeting. A future duchess and a future doctor meeting at a café for a cup of coffee is an everyday occurrence. On the other hand, if we met at a secret location and someone happened to see us, you can be sure it would turn into a scandal.”

He scoffed dryly at her logic.

He had received a letter from her the previous afternoon. Taking the envelope from her maid, he had found it to contain a cryptic message.

*Haven't you wondered why Layla Llewellyn has been acting differently? I think that you and I have a lot to discuss about that. Meet me tomorrow afternoon at one o'clock, at the café across the street from Karlsbar Central Station.*

Knowing that she had looked down on Layla since they were children, Kyle had bristled at Claudine, mentioning her name in that way. Thus, he hadn't felt the need to agree to the meeting. He felt pathetic for having come anyway.

“I knew you would,” she said, smiling much more brightly as he sat down across from her. “The future Dr. Ettman loves Layla too much to ignore my suggestion, as sad as that is.”

“Can you get to the point, my Lady?”

“Wouldn't that be undignified of me? It would look strange as well.” She lifted her hand slightly, and a waiter who was waiting on the other side of the room walked straight over to them.

The two of them remained silent as the waiter poured Kyle's coffee and set the cup down in front of him.

Once the waiter had walked back across the room, Kyle quietly said, “I think it's safe for us to talk now without worrying about damaging your dignity.”

She nodded. “Yes, I think you're right.”

She needed someone who would never tell anyone about what was going on between Matthias and Layla, but who would be able to change Layla's mind. Kyle Ettman seemed like the perfect fit for that description. The only person who would have been better would be the gardener, but she didn't want to be that cruel.

“I assume that you came back to Karlsbar so that you could save Layla,” she quietly said. “However, things didn't go as planned. She rejected you. Are my guesses correct so far?”

He made no response, which she took as a “yes.”

“Of course, she had no choice but to reject you. As bold as her behavior can sometimes be, she's not brazen enough to see two men at once,” she said, her smile never wavering as she delivered these cold words. “What I'm getting at is that Layla belongs to another man right now. And that man happens to be my fiancé, Duke Herhardt.”

Kyle's eyes went wide.

“So, what do you think?” she continued. “I think that you and I have a lot to discuss, don't you?”

* * *

Just as Matthias wanted, he and Layla spent an ordinary, uneventful day together.

She kept her head down as if she were embarrassed to look at him. Feeling very relaxed, he watched her as she ate her breakfast.

Observing the meticulous care with which she chewed and swallowed each bite, he thought to himself, *How Layla-like of her.* He snickered at himself for thinking such a corny thought, but he wasn't ashamed.

Feeling his gaze, she furtively lifted her head. There was a guarded expression on her face, but the breadcrumbs on her lips made her look harmless. At first, he pretended not to notice, then he took pity and pointed to the left side of her mouth. Tilting her head, she cautiously touched the spot, then started blushing when felt the crumbs. He watched this with great amusement.

Flustered, she wiped the crumbs away with her napkin, then continued eating. Noticing the care with which she tapped her spoon against her boiled egg and peeled away its shell, he once again thought to himself, *How Layla-like of her.* This made him chuckle.

After removing the whole shell, she looked up at him with a puzzled expression. She hesitated for a moment, then cautiously took a bite and started chewing. This made him laugh even more loudly.

Breakfast was followed by some leisurely free time.

Of course, it was only leisurely for him. She spent the time anxiously pacing around the room. He suspected that she was trying to show him how uncomfortable she was being in his presence, but he didn't mind. He just enjoyed having her with him.

He went to settle the bill. When he returned, she was sitting by the window, reading the newspaper that he had left on the coffee table. She was so engrossed in what she was reading, she didn't notice him approaching.

Feeling very curious to know what she was reading, he peeked over her shoulder. To his surprise, she was reading an installment of a serialized mystery novel. It was a part of the newspaper that he had never looked at.

When she finally sensed his presence behind her, she flinched and dropped the newspaper, which fell to the floor between them.

To think that someone with such an innocent-looking face enjoyed reading gory novels about criminals! He burst into laughter at the thought.

She stared at him like he was crazy.

*Maybe she's right. Maybe I am crazy,* he thought. *So be it.*

They left the hotel shortly before noon. She protested, but he remained firm in his decision. His assistant brought a second coat for him. Putting that one on himself, he draped his own coat over her shoulders. It was so big on her, it almost dragged on the ground as she walked. He found the sight of this adorable.

“Where are we going?” she nervously asked as they stepped out of the hotel's front entrance.

Rather than saying anything in response, he simply started walking towards the place his assistant had told him about. As they arrived in front of the clothing store, her face went stiff. “This isn't necessary,” she said, frowning and shaking her head.

Ignoring her objection, he dragged her into the shop. The bell on the door rang, and all the shop assistants inside turned to look at the new customers.

# Chapter 90:
## Lovers

A flustered look appeared on the shopkeeper's face before she recovered her smile and said, “Hello, welcome to our store. Please, come in.”

The rich-looking nobleman and the woman with him, who seemed to be wearing his coat, then walked into the store.

The shopkeeper narrowed her eyes as she watched the woman take off the coat. On the one hand, her appearance was a bit shabby for her to be an aristocrat's companion. On the other hand, he was treating her with more intimacy than one would expect if she were his maid.

*Is she his mistress, then?*

The shopkeeper watched the woman as closely as she could within the bounds of politeness.

She was attractive enough to be a powerful man's woman. But if this was the case, it was strange that he was going around in public with her looking so unkempt.

For a long while, the man and woman quietly argued. He kept trying to press her to look at various items in the store, while she kept adamantly refusing everything. At first, the shopkeeper thought it was the sort of squabble she saw often in the store, but soon she sensed that something was different about these two.

The woman appeared to sincerely dislike everything the man was pressing on her. At some points, she even appeared to fear him.

*Why would she fear such a dignified-looking man?*

It was hard for the shopkeeper to understand. After all, she had seen countless attractive young women come into the store with men more than twice their age, acting cute in the hope that they would get their man to buy them something.

The shopkeeper longed to ask what their relationship was, but she managed to patiently keep her mouth shut.

In contrast to her innocent appearance, the woman seemed very stubborn. Ultimately, the man and the woman settled on the compromise of just picking out a coat and a pair of shoes for her. It was a disappointing outcome for the shopkeeper, who had been excited to sell a lot of clothes to these clearly rich customers.

*Well, if that's all they're going to buy, I might as well sell them the priciest items we have,* she thought. Quickly she began picking out the most expensive coats and shoes in the store.

*But what is the relationship between those two?* she wondered, glancing at them.

The man, who was handsome enough to make most women blush, was still gazing intently at the woman. And yet the woman wasn't looking back at him—she kept her eyes lowered the whole time, like a doll.

The shopkeeper still couldn't figure out the relationship between the man and the woman, but she was certain of one thing: he was in love with her. As far as the shopkeeper was concerned, this was very good news, because it meant the man would spare no expense on the woman's behalf.

* * *

The shopkeeper brought out a teal coat that suited Layla very well. She had brought out several other coats as well, but Matthias liked this one, and his preference was all that mattered, since Layla was opposed to getting any clothes at all.

After delivering some trite words of praise about the coat, the shopkeeper then led Layla to the shoe display case and sat her down in a plush chair. The shopkeeper then gestured to some shop assistants, who immediately approached, carrying several pairs of shoes. Layla still seemed uncomfortable, and her gaze remained fixed on the floor.

*She sure is stubborn,* Matthias thought, chuckling as he sauntered over to where the shop assistants were standing.

“I'm sorry, sir. These are the only shoes we have in the lady's

size," the shopkeeper said in a regretful tone of voice. Given just a few days, they could have all sorts of clothes and shoes made for her out of expensive materials, but the man didn't seem to want to wait.

Matthias nodded, then lifted up a pair of light-brown leather shoes and turned around. They were so small, they looked like a doll's shoes as he held them in his hand, which made him chuckle.

"Those shoes..." he said, looking down at the red stain on one of the shoes Layla was wearing. "Are they the same ones you were wearing at the school…?"

Suddenly she remembered the day when he had spilled red ink on her at the school. She briefly looked up at him and bit her lip but said nothing in response.

Knowing that with Layla, silence was usually as good as affirmation, he felt perplexed. He distinctly remembered buying her a new pair of shoes that day. He couldn't fathom why she would have continued to wear the old ones, rather than throwing them away.

"They were new..." she hesitantly muttered, looking down at her feet. "It felt like a waste to throw them away, even though they were stained, so I've been wearing them when I do chores at home."

Her toes fidgeted inside her shoes. She regretted not thinking to change her shoes before getting in the car with the chauffeur.

*He could've just pretended not to notice...*

She couldn't stand how he was always uncovering embarrassing things that she was trying to hide. It was just as bad when he tried to saddle her with favors.

They had made a deal. In exchange for him dropping the charges against Uncle Bill, she would be his mistress. She could endure it as long as that was the extent of it, but she didn't like him adding anything more onto the deal, especially expensive things like this.

No matter what additional things the duke offered her outside of the terms of their deal, all she could give him was her body, as it had been from the start. He seemed to love seeing her embarrassed,

which only added to her misery. When he offered to buy her things, it made her feel like a prostitute.

She could feel herself blushing with shame, so she quickly lowered her head again. With her hands on her knees like a child being punished, she waited for this embarrassing time to pass. The duke then walked a step closer to her. What happened next made everyone standing nearby gasp.

Hearing the onlookers' reaction, she looked up, and her eyes widened at once. The duke was down on one knee in front of her. Their eyes met, but the expression on his face didn't change.

Before she could surmise what was going on, he calmly removed one of her shoes and put one of the new shoes on it. Embarrassed, she pulled her other foot back as if to hide it, but he casually grabbed her ankle and pulled it towards himself.

With even more gentle care, he removed the ink-stained shoe from that foot. He found the sight of her fidgety little foot very cute. Quietly chuckling to himself, he put the new shoe on her foot and tied the laces for her.

Even though she had put thick socks on over her stockings, the shoes were a little big for her. He calmly stood up in front of her, as if there were no problem.

She stared blankly up at him. There were similar looks on the faces of the shop assistants and customers watching them. Ignoring these looks, he held out his hand to her.

*I'm going to be hurt again,* she thought, flinching with reflexive alarm.

Every time she had thought he was going to do something nice for her in the past, he ha ended up walking all over her. She saw no reason why this time would be different. However, as she hesitated to give him her hand, he just patiently waited, as if ready to wait forever if need be.

Feeling the pressure of everyone's eyes on her, she reluctantly put her hand in his. He wrapped his large hand around her cold, trembling hand.

Seeing them holding hands, facing each other, the shopkeeper nodded with satisfaction as she finally realized their relationship.

*Ah, they're lovers.*

* * *

It wasn't an especially cold day—the wind was chilly, but the sun was warm. Matthias stepped out onto the busy downtown sidewalk with Layla, who was wearing the new coat and shoes he had bought her.

As they reached the park, he held out his arm for her. Unsure of the reason for the gesture, she just stared at his arm. Her cheeks quickly reddened. With a serious look on her face, she looked around. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

It was quite an irritating attitude, but he didn't feel particularly bothered by it. Deciding to respect her wishes, he grabbed her hand and started walking again. She tried desperately to wrest her hand away from his, until he firmly interlocked his fingers with hers, at which point she gave up.

After a leisurely walk, they went to a café and took their seats in front of a large window overlooking the entrance to the park. He gazed at her with his head aslant. When she was with others, such as Bill Remmer, she seemed fairly talkative, but with him, she rarely opened her mouth.

He looked out the window and noticed a bird sitting in a tree by the street. “What kind of bird is that?” he asked, pointing to it.

Surprised by his question, she looked up and saw the bird he was pointing at. “It's a raven,” she replied. *How can he not know what a raven looks like?*

She couldn't believe it. Even little children knew what ravens looked like. And there were plenty of them in Arvis's forest.

She stared at him, astounded that this raven-like gentleman couldn't recognize a raven.

Before her puzzlement was resolved, he pointed at another bird in a different tree and asked, “What about that one?”

“That's a chickadee.” “That's a thrush.” “That's a yellow-throated warbler.”

For each bird he pointed to, she immediately supplied the name. Her gentle pronunciation made the bird names sound like music to his ears. He longed to hear her say his own name in that same tone. He could feel himself growing warmer.

“You have all those memorized?” he asked.

“I live right next to the forest,” she replied.

“What's your favorite type of bird?”

After quickly responding to his last several questions, she didn't have an answer ready for this one. “Well... it's hard to pick a favorite,” she finally replied. To fill in the awkward silence after her reply, she asked, “What about you, Your Grace? Do you have a favorite type of bird?” She tilted her head slightly as she asked, causing the golden frames of her glasses to shine in the sunlight. “And I don't mean for hunting,” she added.

Chuckling at her added condition, he cheerfully replied, “Canary.”

She looked very surprised. “Canary? You mean the songbird?”

“Yes, precisely.”

“Why? Men usually like big, strong birds, like hawks or eagles.”

She was sincerely curious why this slayer of beautiful birds liked such a small, dainty species of bird. It didn't seem to fit him at all.

Leaning back in his chair, he calmly gazed at her. As the silence dragged on, his eyes never strayed from her face as she stared at him with a look of curiosity.

*If I don't answer, maybe she'll keep looking at me like that forever,* he thought, before rejecting the silly thought and replying, “Because they're beautiful.”

This was not the answer she had expected.

“I think it's the most beautiful type of bird in the world,” he said, staring intently at her with a profound look in his eyes.

“I see...” she replied. Feeling a little flustered, she put a second spoonful of sugar into her already-lukewarm coffee. Her lowered

eyes quivered.

Once her vain struggle with the sugar that refused to dissolve was over, silence returned to the table. She set down her spoon and cautiously looked up at him. He was still looking straight at her. This made her feel slightly uncomfortable, so she shifted her gaze and looked out the window. Just then, a bird flew up to the window.

"That one is a pigeon," she quickly blurted out, wanting to break the awkward silence.

Before she realized how silly it was for her to tell him this, he chuckled and replied, "I know." Raising his eyebrows briefly, he glanced at the bird and then back at her.

"Ah, yes…" *Of course he knows what pigeons look like,* she thought, picking up her spoon again. "I see," she muttered.

As he watched her stirring her coffee again, he burst into delighted laughter.

She flinched, but just kept stirring. Her toes felt funny inside her new shoes.

It had been a very strange day.

# Chapter 91:
## At the Longest

Kyle remained in his seat long after Claudine had left the café. The waiter quietly approached and set down the third cup of coffee for him before taking away the cold second cup, which Kyle hadn't even touched. The afternoon sunlight was warm, but Kyle's face was white as a sheet as he sat staring into space.

*Don't get swept up in Claudine's lies,* he had told himself repeatedly during their meeting. He was sure that she was making everything up in order to slander Layla. If it wasn't that, it didn't make any sense. How could Layla do such things?

However, despite his best efforts, doubt was already starting to eat away at him as he thought back to the strange uneasiness he had recently felt whenever he had seen Layla and the duke together.

*If she's really the duke's mistress... then what are she and I?*

Claudine had said that Layla's relationship with the duke had begun immediately after Kyle had left for the capital. Almost as if they had been waiting for the chance. Claudine hadn't made much of an attempt to hide her malice as she had said this, and he had already wondered if it was all a ruse. Now, however, he wondered if those slanderous words she had uttered were true.

He didn't know Claudine well, but there was one thing about her of which he was certain. No matter how much she disliked Layla, she wouldn't harm her own reputation just to slander her. She had too much self-pride for that.

That dyed-in-the-wool aristocrat wouldn't disgrace herself and her fiancé just to hurt Layla, would she? “No,” he muttered, shaking his head to rid himself of the suspicion. *This isn't just anyone, it's Layla.*

He staggered up from his seat and left the busy café. There was a cold breeze, but his mind remained cloudy. Without knowing where

he was headed, he started walking down the sidewalk with an uneven gait. His eyes were welling up with tears, but he just kept walking. He soon found himself unable to breathe properly.

In his head, he grasped what Claudine had told him, but his heart wouldn't believe it. As this discrepancy started to make him feel like he was being torn up inside, he collapsed to the ground in front of an empty alleyway and clutched his head.

He had to see Layla. He knew that was the only way. But what could he possibly say to her?

Feeling even more lost, he shut his eyes.

* * *

Matthias and Layla had what could almost be called a normal conversation. For the most part, he asked questions and she answered them, but occasionally she would pose small questions to him as well. He didn't mind that she only seemed to be asking them out of politeness.

She was facing him without fear or anger, listening to his questions and responding to them. He didn't care what the reason was. She had a gentle expression on her face, and her large eyes were looking straight at him.

He paid close attention to every little thing she said, and to every slight shift in her posture or facial expression. As he did, he felt a strange, warm feeling in his chest. All he was doing was quietly gazing at her, yet his breathing was growing shaky. He felt oddly nervous.

*Have I gone mad?* he wondered, just as he had wondered earlier that morning. And yet, he felt utterly satisfied in that moment. It was enough for him.

“Are we leaving now?” she cautiously asked, unable to hide her eagerness as she saw him checking his watch.

“Sure,” he calmly replied, setting aside his pathetic, sentimental wish that their time together would continue forever.

She looked down and quietly exhaled. It bothered him that she

seemed so relieved at the news that they were leaving, but he still couldn't take his eyes off her.

His throat was dry, and he felt almost feverish. He fervently wished that she would look at him again. As if she had heard his wish, she hesitantly looked up at him. She had been chewing on her lower lip, so it shone with a deep red.

"You're... going to keep the secret, right?" she asked.

"The secret?"

"I mean from Uncle Bill..." she whispered. In contrast to her timid voice and posture, her eyes were filled with determination.

*Oh, that's right,* he thought as she reminded him of the reason why she was here in front of him. It was because of his threat or his advice. Whichever it was, hearing her whisper her uncle's name made him feel awful.

When he wouldn't give a firm answer, she said with greater urgency, "He can never know anything about this."

*Bill Remmer...* As he repeated that name in his mind, his blue eyes regained their usual coldness. *What could be so great about him that she is ready to give away everything she has for him?*

"Even if I keep the secret, do you really think he will remain in the dark about us forever?" he sincerely asked.

No secret could last forever. Especially this sort of secret. However, she just stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Forever...?" she finally asked, furrowing her brow at his puzzling question.

At the longest, their relationship would last only until the duke's wedding in the summer. Even if he still showed interest in her after that, she was determined to sever ties with him. And yet he was now talking about *forever*. Her hands started shaking under the table. She couldn't believe he would use such a grand word in talking about their relationship.

After taking a sip of water, he set down his glass and coldly said, "He's going to find out eventually."

"No!" she shouted, thinking, *I'm going to get away from you before*

*that can happen.* To stop herself from expressing that sentiment to him out loud, she forcefully bit her lip, then said, “D-don't say that, all right? Uncle Bill c-can't know anything about us.”

She didn't like that she was pleading with a man who was using cowardly tricks on her, but she knew she had to. She couldn't stand the thought of letting Uncle Bill get hurt. He wouldn't be able to stand it if he were to find out the shameful deal she had made with the duke. Thus, her relationship with the duke needed to stay a secret until the day that she could escape the duke's grasp. She was willing to do anything towards that end, even if it meant enduring all sorts of indignities as he treated her like his plaything.

“Your Grace,” she said, her voice shaking as it always did when she made this sort of plea, “please.”

As he looked into her eyes, which were filled with a mixture of fear and expectancy, a twisted smile formed on his lips.

She was beautiful. He had wanted to have her. So, he had made her his. His eyes slowly narrowed as he looked at her. *Made her mine…?* Suddenly he questioned this idea. Was she really his?

Her dream of marrying another man and departing had been crushed, leaving her stuck at Arvis. Ultimately she had become his mistress. Everything had gone according to his wishes.

He nodded to agree to her request. He didn't tell her that it was only a matter of time before the gardener would find out about their relationship, but he knew it was true. He himself didn't understand why he couldn't let go of this woman who by all accounts should have meant nothing to him. He didn't understand why, no matter how much control he exerted over her, it never felt like she was his. He didn't know how much longer these feelings of his would continue.

Letting out a small sigh of relief, Layla looked away from him again. Looking at him always made her feel uncomfortable, and a little afraid, but today there was another, hard-to-describe emotion on top of those other unpleasant ones.

As she lightly tapped the toes of her shoes together, he suddenly

stood up and went to her side, then grabbed her chin and made her look up at him. Unable to avoid making eye contact with him, she recoiled in fright and tried to pull away from him. He expressed his intention not to let her go by strengthening his grip on her chin. He gazed at her for a short while, as if searching for something in her face. Then he let go of her.

With a quivering hand, she rubbed her chin. She could still feel his warmth. Her cheeks were blushing. She hoped that he didn't notice how flustered she was, but she knew he probably did.

Taking a step back, he offered his hand. “Let's go.”

Feeling self-conscious as she sensed passersby starting to stare at them, she put her hand in his.

He gripped her hand so tightly it hurt. To stop herself from crying out in pain, she bit her lip and quickly lowered her eyes.

The laces which he had tied for her bounced with each step she took.

* * *

Kyle was walking towards Arvis. He had already passed by the road leading to his parent's house, so Arvis was his only possible destination.

Matthias frowned as he watched him through the car window. Kyle, meanwhile, kept looking straight ahead as he walked. There was only one possible reason why the doctor's son would be going to Arvis: Layla.

Matthias coldly stared at the empty seat next to him where she had been sitting. She had gotten out of the car in downtown Karlsbar, giving the excuse that she had an errand to run. She had obviously been lying, but he had allowed her to go.

As she had looked at him with fretful, pleading eyes, he had realized that he no longer enjoyed the sight. In the past, seeing her beg or cry in front of him had brought him pleasure and satisfaction, but now it brought on a completely different emotion in him.

*Then what in the world do I want from her?* As that question was filling his mind, he had noticed Kyle. *Is that why?* Suddenly the image of Kyle and Layla together flashed into his mind.

Before their engagement was broken off, they had always been together. And with Kyle, she had always looked happy, with a bright smile on her face. He gulped uneasily as he remembered this.

No matter what he did for her, she never showed him that beautiful smile. But with Kyle, she used to share it freely. She would cheerfully gaze at the doctor's son and chat with him lovingly.

Matthias then realized that he could no longer remain calm at the sound of Kyle Ettman's name. Previously, he hadn't worried about the possibility of Layla returning to her first love, since he had felt secure in the fact that she was his. But no longer. It didn't matter that she couldn't reciprocate his feelings. Kyle possessed the thing that he yearned for. And for all he knew, that fact would never change.

Finally, he came up with a devious solution. The most appalling thing about it all was that even though he knew he could never truly have Layla, his longing for her seemed like it would never cease. He wished that he could make their past into his own. Soon, however, the car arrived at the mansion, and when he stepped out, there was no trace in his face or movements of the torment he had been feeling.

“Welcome back, Duke Herhardt!”

Standing amid the line of staff members greeting him was Claudine, who should have already returned to the House of Brandt.

“I see you're still here at Arvis,” he said.

“Yes, I wanted to spend a little more time with you, so I waited for you to return,” she cheerfully replied, linking arms with him. “I trust that you missed me too.” She glanced at the back seat of the car, then looked at him again. “You did, didn't you?”

# Chapter 92:
## An Unplanned Trip

No matter how much she mulled it over, it still seemed strange.

Layla stopped scrubbing the floor for a moment and stared into space. There was fine dust floating amid the clear sunlight. Winter was starting to give way to spring. The cold had lost its bite.

*Why was Kyle acting like that?*

She couldn't stop thinking about the look on Kyle's face when they had met a few days earlier. After getting out of the duke's car in Karlsbar, she had run into Kyle while she was walking back to Arvis. Just as she was reaching Arvis's gates, she had seen him walking towards her in the distance.

As soon as their eyes met, he had called out to her: *"Layla..."* His placid voice had sounded almost like a whimper.

Concerned about him, she had almost walked over to him, but she had stopped when she glanced down and was reminded of the shoes she had on. They were the shoes the duke had bought her, and they had immediately reminded her of the unfortunate situation she was in.

Kyle had called her name a few more times but hadn't said anything else. Eventually, he had stopped looking at her and looked up at the sky, sweeping his trembling hands across his face.

He was the first to walk on. Just as some Arvis employees were starting to look at them with curiosity, he had casually strode on past her. As he passed, she caught a glimpse of his eyes up close and noticed that they were moist with tears.

*He must have had some reason for coming...* If he had come for the same reason as before, he wouldn't have looked so sad. Before she had become his first love, they had been the closest of friends. Even if the time had passed when they had been able to tell how the other was feeling just by glancing at the other's face, she couldn't miss the fact that something was clearly bothering him.

“Layla!”

The sound of the mailman calling out to her roused her from her reverie.

“Yes! I'll be right there!” Putting down her scrubbing brush, she bolted up and hurried out the front door.

He handed her a telegram from Uncle Bill. As she read it, all other concerns cleared from her mind, and she started beaming like a child. In just two days' time, Uncle Bill would be back at Arvis.

* * *

“Whenever Claudine stays here at Arvis, the whole mansion feels full of cheer,” Elise von Herhardt said with sincere joy.

“I agree,” Dowager Herhardt replied. “I feel at ease whenever Claudine is around.”

“It makes me so happy to hear you say that. I was worried that I had overstayed my welcome,” Claudine replied, smiling politely at her fiancé's mother and grandmother as she set down her fork with perfect decorum.

The sunlight streaming in through the windows made the air in the morning room where they were eating lunch warm enough that it felt like spring had already arrived.

“Don't say such things, Claudine,” Dowager Herhardt replied, gently chiding Claudine before looking at her grandson, who was quietly eating. “I know that our circumstances necessitated postponing the wedding by a year, but if that hadn't been the case, you would have already been a Herhardt. Isn't that right, Matthias?”

After hearing his grandmother's question, Matthias finally lifted his head and looked at Claudine. The smile on his face was very familiar to Claudine—impeccably polite but without an ounce of warmth. The only unusual thing was that he made no response.

She had expected him to coldly reply that his fiancée was free to do as she wished, but instead, he just flashed a quick smile before taking a sip of water. On the surface, there wasn't anything wrong

with his attitude, but the mere fact that it was different from his usual behavior made Claudine uneasy.

*Has Kyle not confronted them yet?* she wondered, clutching the napkin on her lap forcefully.

Meanwhile, the conversation shifted to various recent goings-on at Arvis. Soon the rumors about Layla came up.

“The gardener's adopted daughter and Dr. Ettman's son are meeting again. At least that seems to be the case,” Elise said in a casual tone.

Her remark was addressed to Dowager Herhardt, who adored the doctor's son, but Claudine jumped in to respond.

“Layla and Kyle Ettman? Sure. If Mrs. Ettman hadn't done what she did, those two would surely have been husband and wife by now. They loved each other. They really seemed like a good match.”

“Hmm, yes. That's for sure,” Elise von Herhardt replied. “Do you think that nice young man could be planning to defy his mother's objections and elope with Layla?”

“I don't know. Would Kyle behave so rashly?” Dowager Herhardt replied, furrowing her brow. “Rumors are just rumors. Once Kyle is a little older, he'll realize that the choice of one's spouse is much too important a decision to make based on puppy love.”

“I'm surprised to hear you say that. I thought you had a high opinion of Layla,” Claudine replied. She then glanced at Matthias. He was focusing on his meal, and hardly seemed to be listening to the conversation at all.

“Of course, Bill Remmer's adopted daughter is a nice, pretty young lady,” Dowager Herhardt replied. “I like Layla a lot. But private feelings and marriage are separate matters. Mrs. Ettman brought shame and ridicule upon herself by committing those lowly acts, but her desire for her son to marry a woman from the upper crust is completely understandable. It was just the method she used that was the problem.”

“Sure, but... Kyle seemed to sincerely love Layla.”

“Oh, Claudine. Don't you understand that as heir of a prestigious family, it's not appropriate for Kyle to make such a weighty decision on the basis of mere emotions? The Ettmans may not have an aristocratic title, but they're still a prominent, well-respected family. It would never make sense for their heir to marry a working-class orphan.” Dowager Herhardt's voice contained not a hint of malice as she gently reminded Claudine how their world worked.

Claudine smiled and nodded like an obedient child, then looked at Matthias again. She expected that by now even his icy exterior would have been pierced and he would be showing some anxiousness at the matter being discussed. However, he was still just smiling calmly, gazing at his grandmother. A chill went down Claudine's spine as she beheld his carefree demeanor. She started to regret not pointing out the lowly orphan to him when she noticed her hiding from them on their walk the previous afternoon.

*Could she possibly enjoy being loved by him?* she wondered. *Is it even love?*

With a coy look on her face, she shifted her gaze away from her fiancé. Upon reflection, she actually pitied Layla. Layla had lost Kyle, who would have loved and cherished her forever, and was instead stuck with the coldhearted Matthias.

After the cheerful lunch concluded, Claudine continued chatting with Dowager Herhardt and Lady Herhardt over tea, while Matthias went off on a walk by himself. The unseasonably warm afternoon weather seemed to be making the birds sing more sonorously than usual.

Matthias had no reason to be bothered by the conversation that had happened at lunch. More than anyone, he already knew everything that had been discussed, including his grandmother's opinion of Layla. This was why he had made Layla his mistress, and why he had no plans to change that arrangement in the future.

He turned onto the forest path in order to shake off the faint irritation he was feeling, in order to rid himself of the thought of breaking off his engagement to be with Layla instead. Only when

the gardener's cottage came into his view did he realize where he had been unwittingly headed.

Rather than turning around, he kept walking into the sunny yard.

* * *

The western sky was already turning red by the time Layla neared Arvis. She started pedaling her bicycle faster than usual. The paper bag of groceries in her basket rustled in the wind. She was planning to make some of Uncle Bill's favorite dishes for their first meal in a long time.

Maybe once they were sitting across from each other, she would have the courage to tell him that she wanted to leave Arvis with him and start a new life somewhere else. It wouldn't be easy, but together she was confident that they could make it. Uncle Bill had said as much himself. He had said that once he got too old to look after the mansion's huge garden, he would like to move to a small house somewhere.

He had likely been thinking of a house in a nearby village, but his mind could probably be changed. Then she could get a teaching job at a school in a distant city where the two of them could live happily for a long time. Their life would be like it had used to be in Arvis when she was younger.

Thinking about all this made her feel like a weight had been lifted off her chest. She decided to forget about the shoes and coat the duke had bought her. After deliberating for a while, she had determined that she could never bring herself to wear them again. As far as she was concerned, they didn't belong to her.

She didn't want to covet anything that wasn't hers. She had learned the hard way how much hurt that sort of greed could cause. She wished that she could forget about the night when, unable to untie the shoelaces the duke had tied for her, she had slipped off her shoes with the laces still tied. She also wished that she could forget about having seen the duke taking a walk with his fiancée the previous afternoon.

When she got home, she was first going to put away the groceries, and then feed the animals. Once the cottage came into her view down the forest path, she felt even more excited. After the animals were fed, she would light a fire in the fireplace, and while the cottage was warming up she would make dinner.

Then, just as she had gotten off her bicycle and lifted the bag of groceries, she heard a calm voice greeting her.

“Hello, Layla.”

She flinched and almost dropped the bag before turning in the direction where the voice had come from.

It was the duke.

Sitting cross-legged on Uncle Bill's chair on the porch, he was looking at her with his head slightly tilted. At first she didn't believe her eyes, so she blinked a few times, but it was definitely him.

“Your Grace... what are you doing here?”

“Am I not allowed to come here? This is part of my estate.”

“I know it's part of your estate, but this is Uncle Bill's and my home.”

“So?”

“It's not right to barge into someone's home uninvited.” She reached her trembling hand into her coat pocket and fished out the house key. “Please leave.”

The items in the grocery bag rattled noisily as she held it in one arm.

He looked into her eyes as she stood in front of the front door. As his gaze shifted down to her feet, his smile vanished.

She was wearing a pair of shoes even older and more worn-out than the ink-stained ones she had thrown away at the clothing store. Her coat also looked tattered and threadbare. He had already been aware that she didn't like receiving anything from him, but seeing her wearing such shabby items made him chuckle bitterly.

He slowly stood up and walked over to her. Instead of escaping into the cottage like she had been about to do, she hurriedly turned around. Before she could reach out to close the door, he forcefully

pushed it open.

# Chapter 93:
## I Love Him

“Leave, please!” Layla shouted, looking around.

Matthias realized that it wasn't just her shabby clothing that was the same as before; her fear of him was just as intense as it had always been. He had thought that their lovely day together had marked a turning point in their relationship, but now he saw that this was just a delusion. He had been constantly revisiting the memory of that day with great pleasure and had been entertaining all sorts of fanciful possibilities. All of this made him feel unbearably pathetic now, as did his spontaneous decision to come to visit her at the cottage.

In the past, he had treated her like she was nothing to him, but it appeared that, in fact, he was the one who was nothing to her. And yet, strangely, he longed for her, and he longed to be hers. It was something that could never be, but at some point, he had started desiring it. Perhaps he had desired it from the start.

“Why are you doing this? You don't have the right!” she shouted as she staggered away from him.

The sound of glass bottles breaking soon followed as she dropped the bag of groceries she had been holding.

“The right?” he asked.

As she stooped over to pick up the dropped groceries, he grabbed her shoulders and made her stand up and face him. As she tried to back away from him, he followed her, soon passing over the cottage's threshold.

“You don't have the right to come here and treat me like this,” she said, scowling at him.

Their idyllic day together now felt like it had just been a dream. He was right not to have gotten his hopes up. After spending that wondrous day together in another city, this dismal situation was all that was greeting him back at home.

“I'm holding up my end of the deal,” she said. “So why are you treating me like this? After you made that promise, how could you come here, to my home...?”

She tried shoving him away, but he was far too strong for her. The feeling of powerlessness increased her anger even more.

She had seen Claudine and him taking a walk the previous day while she was dragging a cart of hay back from Arvis's stables. The stable keeper was a good friend of Bill's, and he often gathered hay to be used as feed for the animals that Bill and Layla kept at their cottage.

When Layla had gone to pick up the hay, he had offered to pull the cart to the cottage for her, but she had firmly rejected the offer. She was perfectly capable of doing it herself. At least, that's how she had felt until she encountered the couple.

Claudine, who rarely ventured outside the area around the mansion's garden for her walks, had been walking with the duke in a remote area of the estate, on the path in between the stables and the forest. Startled at the sight of the couple, Layla had hidden behind some large trees on the side of the path. Claudine had suddenly looked back but hadn't appeared to see her.

While the duke and Claudine continued their leisurely walk, Layla had desperately prayed not to be seen. She didn't want to stand in front of the two of them together ever again. Even though none of her prayers ever seemed to have been answered earlier in her life, this one was. The couple passed out of sight without showing any sign of noticing her.

As soon as the coast was clear, she pulled the cart back out from amid the trees. Feeling anxious to get home quickly, she started moving very quickly. Soon she tripped, and the cart toppled over, spilling hay all over the path. She frantically gathered the scattered hay and put it back into the cart, then started running again. By the time she got back to the cottage, she was covered with hay from head to toe.

She couldn't find words for the emotion she had felt at that

moment. How could one describe a feeling that was a jumbled mixture of relief, humiliation, sadness, and shame?

“Why are you doing this? Did you find the last few days without me so boring that you had to come to this lowly cottage to use me like I'm your plaything?”

She knew that yelling at him wouldn't accomplish anything, but she wanted to anyway. Just once, she wanted to pay him back for all the times he had treated her like garbage. When she remembered the strange feeling she had felt on the day they had spent together, her repulsion increased.

“Shut your mouth, Layla,” he said in a disturbingly quiet voice.

Her body was frozen with fear, but she didn't want to stop talking.

“Fine, if I'm your plaything, then play with me. Play to your heart's content. That's the kind of person you are, right? You do whatever you want, and you only leave once you're satisfied.” Staring straight into his eyes, she continued. “Shall I undress for you? Oh, wait, no. You said you found that dull. Then go ahead, have at me. I don't care. It's going to be awful for me regardless.”

“Stop, Layla.”

“Why? Is this dull for you too? All the better. Get rid of me, then. When you do, I'll be sincerely grateful. It will be the one and only happiness you have ever given me. So... Ack!”

She shrieked as she suddenly felt her body being lifted up. She only realized what was happening after he had carried her to the kitchen and thrown her down on the table.

“Do you like seeing me being driven wild like this?” he whispered as he pressed his body down on top of hers.

“Maybe... Maybe I like it as much as you like seeing me cry,” she retorted, thinking to herself, *Don't cry*.

She had hoped that her quip would make him feel bad, but in response he just let out an unhinged laugh and said, “Then you'd better cry, so that we can have a fair deal, right?” After caressing her hair for a moment, he suddenly grabbed her chin. “A deal that's

fun for both of us."

At this point, she felt ready to denounce him in the most ferocious terms, but he didn't let her have the chance. Before she could utter the first word, his lips were on top of hers. Shortly thereafter, the intermingled sound of their breathing started to permeate the darkness.

* * *

Kyle leaned his bicycle against the cottage's shed. There was a look of utter determination on his face. After a long process of deliberation, he had made up his mind.

Rather than let himself continue to be overtaken by feelings of suspicion and anxiety, he was going to ask Layla directly. This was all the more imperative if what Claudine had told him was true. If that was the case, then he needed to rescue Layla. Even if things between him and Layla could never be the way they had used to be, he couldn't just sit back and let her life be ruined.

To get rid of the last trace of hesitation, he took a deep breath and slowly let it out. However, before he had reached the cottage's front door, his determination had already reverted to uneasiness. The door was open, but the inside of the cottage was dark. Moreover, there were objects strewn about in front of the door.

He stood in a daze for a moment, his face ashen, then he ran into the cottage. Just as the darkness was making him worry that he was going to encounter something disturbing, he happened upon something much more disturbing than he could have imagined.

There was someone on the kitchen table. At first, he thought it was just a single large man, but he soon realized that there was a woman underneath the man.

"Layla...?" he called out in a shaky voice.

It felt like time had stopped. Frozen with shock, he stared at the scene in front of him, unable to believe what he was seeing. The two others were just as still.

*Layla... and the duke?*

While Kyle glared at him, the duke slowly stood up straight. Unlike the half-naked Layla, he was fully dressed. His appearance was pristine, other than his moist, red lips.

“What... are you...” Kyle stammered. His fingers started shaking, and soon his whole body was trembling.

The duke, however, was facing him with utter composure. Layla quickly sat up, then hid behind the duke's back as she hurried to put her clothes back on.

“What is going on here?” Kyle asked, looking at the groceries scattered around the open front door, then turning back to face the duke. His brown eyes were heavy with the despair that this undeniable reality had thrust upon him.

“Exactly what you see,” Matthias casually replied.

His brazen attitude snapped the last thread of Kyle's self-control.

What Claudine had said was right. The duke was defiling Layla.

“What have you done to Layla?!” Kyle shouted, rushing at the duke.

Before Layla knew it, the two men were grappling with each other.

“K-Kyle! No! Don't!”

Despite her cries, the fight was only growing more heated. It was a strange fight. Kyle obstinately kept lunging at Matthias, who dispassionately blocked every one of Kyle's punches without punching back. Even so, Matthias was the more threatening of the two.

“Kyle!” Layla screamed with tears in her eyes.

The two men were of similar height and build, but the duke was a trained soldier. It was clear what would happen the moment he grew tired of Kyle's relentless attacks.

“Are you a human being?” Kyle shouted at him. “Human beings don't do things like this! Layla, how could this happen?!”

After staggering for a moment, he lunged at the duke again. Distracted by the sight of Layla crying, Matthias failed to block Kyle's incoming fist. He used the back of his hand to wipe the blood

from the edge of his lips.

Kyle ran over to Layla, who was pale-faced and trembling. “How long has it been going on? How long has that bastard been doing this to you?”

She opened her mouth to say something, but all that came out were gasps and sobs. Kyle grabbed her wrist. He was crying, just like her.

“Let's go, Layla. I'll... I'll rescue you. So, let's go.”

He turned, ready to lead Layla out of the cottage at once. However, they weren't able to take a single step. The duke was standing in their way. His face bore a cold expression, other than the slight smirk on his injured lips.

“Get out of the way,” Kyle said in a voice full of contempt.

The duke turned his head slightly to look at him but didn't budge.

“No...” Layla muttered fearfully as she saw the cold anger in the duke's eyes.

The duke glanced briefly at her before looking back at Kyle. Then, all of a sudden, his bloody hand came flying at Kyle's face.

As Layla screamed, the fight quickly escalated to an all-out brawl. Kyle attacked the duke with vehement furor, while the duke no longer limited himself to moderate defense. The two men's shadows mingled in the dark cottage as they exchanged blows.

“Stop! Kyle! Kyle!”

Kyle fell to the floor. Layla frantically ran over to him. Matthias coldly glared at her back as she wrapped her whole body around Kyle.

“Don't do this, Kyle. Please,” she pleaded, clutching Kyle's shoulder to try to keep him from standing up again.

Kyle's rage-filled eyes finally softened as they turned towards her. “Layla, did that bastard, did he...” he stammered in a miserable voice. His contorted face was soaked with tears.

“No. No, Kyle. It's not like that,” she replied. Tears were flung from her chin as she firmly shook her head. “I... l-love him,” she whispered in a trembling voice.

Matthias, who had been about to grab her shoulders, stopped when he heard what she said.

“I... I love him,” she repeated, her voice even shakier this time.

In an instant, the life seemed to drain out of Kyle's bloodshot eyes.

“I love him, Kyle. I love him…”

# Chapter 94:
## I Understand It All

Layla lowered her head, unable to say anything more. She started to shed tears so thick that it was hard to open her eyes. The tears started to drip down onto Kyle's hands as he sat on the floor.

Kyle had lost all his will to fight and was staring up at Layla as she sobbed. Her disheveled hair was half-covering her gaunt face and neck. Her partly open blouse and pale, trembling hands were painful for Kyle to look at.

“That's the reason,” she continued. “So please, Kyle...” Her face was marked with deep sadness and embarrassment.

Kyle let out a devastating moan. Duke Herhardt, who had approached Layla as though he was about to pick her up and carry her away, stepped back and watched the other two. A sliver of the pale moonlight revealed to Kyle that the duke was smiling.

“You're engaged,” Kyle said, glaring over Layla's shoulder at the duke. “You're about to be married!”

Matthias nodded indifferently. His posture and facial expression were calm and composed, wholly unlike the way he had looked moments earlier when he was engaged in a fistfight like a common ruffian.

While Kyle let out a bitter sigh and ran his fingers through his messy hair, the duke helped Layla stand up. Then he gently swept her hair away from her wet cheek, stooped down, and kissed the edge of her tear-filled eyes.

Like an animal licking its wounds, he slowly continued to kiss the tears from her face. With her eyes closed, she put forth no resistance as he did this.

*How could you?* Kyle thought. He would have preferred to have gone mad, but his mind was clearer than ever.

The duke patted Layla on the head as if he was telling her she had done a good job, then he buttoned up her blouse and fixed her

collar. “I'll be back after the uninvited guest leaves,” he whispered in an intimate tone.

She nodded. A few tears hung on her chin, glimmering like diamonds.

Before leaving the cottage, the duke walked over to Kyle, who made no effort to stand up. The duke bowed his head to him politely as if the fight between them had never happened.

The sound of his footsteps could be heard passing through the front doorway onto the porch, then out across the yard. Once it was quiet again, Layla went to Kyle's side. She gasped at the sight of his bloody lips and swollen cheeks. If the fight had gone on any longer, he might have been seriously injured.

Her lips were quivering, as were his, though for different reasons. They both spoke at the same time.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Don't touch me,” he said.

She froze at the cold, harsh tone of his voice. She had never heard him speak to her like that before.

Ignoring her question, he staggered up onto his feet and asked, “How could you do this?”

“Kyle...”

“Of all people, how could you, Layla Llewellyn, do this?” He looked at her with eyes full of a deep sense of betrayal, as well as sympathy for her. “When you coldly rejected me, was it so that you could live like this? When you talked about working hard to achieve a life without shame, were you talking about life as the duke's secret mistress?!”

He wanted her to cry. He wanted her to make an excuse. Or if not that, he earnestly wished that she would turn on him and shout angrily. But all she did was bite her quivering lip and put her pale hands together before saying, “I'm sorry.”

It was the last phrase Kyle wanted to hear.

“I'm... really sorry, Kyle.”

He couldn't believe that he was hearing her apologize, using the

same lips with which she had just said she loved the duke moments earlier. *"I'm sorry."* He could never have imagined how insulting that phrase could sound. He let out a wild, desperate scream that seemed to shake the walls of the cold cottage.

Then, with his bloodshot eyes, he looked around the familiar cottage. For years, it had been a second home to him. He looked at the kitchen table and thought about how he and she had sat there, talking and laughing, all the way back when their legs were too short for their feet to reach the ground. The cottage was packed with precious memories like that for him. Then he looked again at Layla, his beautiful first and only love, who on top of that table had just been kissing a man who would soon be another woman's husband.

Once the last trace of his anger had subsided, he snidely asked, "How long has it been going on? Did I get in the way?" *That bastard,* he thought. Even though he was filled with such a deep sense of shame that he wanted to rip his own tongue out, he wouldn't stop.

She shook her head, sniffling. Even as she clutched the hem of her skirt and pounded her fists against her legs, she looked extremely slender and frail. When he realized how emaciated she was, it deepened his hatred of the duke even more.

He stiffly wiped the tears from his cheeks and asked, "Are you still not going to stop? The duke is going to become Lady Claudine's husband very soon. Saying that you love a man like this... You know exactly what that means, Layla. You can't live like that!"

He vividly remembered the future that Layla used to imagine for herself. She had told him countless times that she wanted to become an ornithologist so that she could study birds. The brilliant young girl had talked about how one day she would become as free as a bird and set off somewhere far, far away. Whenever she talked about this, her eyes had sparkled with expectancy.

"The duke can't give you the future that you used to dream about, Layla. Do you really not realize that loving him means giving

up on all that?”

As he looked at her breathlessly sobbing, he thought back to the spring day when she had finally accepted his proposal. As she had told him she wanted a house full of children with faces that looked like theirs, she had seemed so hopeful and innocent, while now she looked forlorn.

It pained his heart to think that the very same Layla was now reduced to being the mistress of a man who was going to make her lonely for the rest of her life.

“He's going to ruin your life, Layla.”

His plead now sounded like a prayer.

“I know, Kyle,” she replied, dropping her head so that she wouldn't have to look at him anymore. “I know all of that.”

“Layla, you—”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Kyle.”

She put her hands over her face and burst into sobs again. Tears started falling from his eyes again as well.

The pale moon hung high in the sky and dimly illuminated the two of them. Their tears continued falling for a long time.

* * *

Eventually, Kyle left the cottage. Matthias still had not returned.

Claudine gazed at the moonlit garden with an amused expression on her face. Matthias had sent word that he was busy with work and would be having dinner separately in his cabin. It was something he had done many times before, but now it was harder to believe him.

*He probably went to see her, didn't he?* she thought. *Perhaps all three of them met. But Kyle is gone now, so why hasn't Matthias returned?*

After question upon question filled her mind, she put on a coat and headed outside for a nighttime stroll, leaving her maid behind. As she walked through the forest at a brisk pace, she giggled. She had received many things from Matthias and Layla. Now, for the

sake of the Brandt family's honor, she was going to pay them back.

Once night fell, the forest was spooky, as though it was haunted. Claudine gradually increased her pace, as if she was being chased by the nocturnal birds whose calls rang out eerily amid the trees. She breathed a sigh of relief when she finally reached the riverside.

She narrowed her eyes as she saw that the lights were on inside the duke's cabin. Perhaps he hadn't gone to see Layla after all. Or perhaps he had brought her to the cabin.

She shook her head to try to rid herself of the unpleasant thoughts that were coming to her mind, but her suspicion wouldn't go away. Just then, the cabin went dark.

Startled, she rushed to hide behind a willow tree that was growing next to the river. Soon, a tall man walked out of the cabin.

It was Matthias.

* * *

Later that night, Matthias returned. Layla could tell that it was him just from the sound of his brief knock at the front door.

Sitting on her bed with her arms around her knees, she had been quietly waiting for him. She hadn't locked the door. She knew he would have done whatever it took to get to her and satisfy his lust. A meaningless act of resistance would only lead to more misery for her.

Matthias knocked once more, then opened the door and walked inside. The sound of his unhurried footsteps and the floorboards creaking gradually grew nearer.

When she heard him knock on her bedroom door, she went from being about to cry to snickering to herself. *Sure. Duke Herhardt has always been classy. Even when he's tormenting me.*

She watched with ice-cold eyes as the door slowly opened. He briefly glanced inside the room before stepping over the threshold.

He looked more or less the same as he had earlier. He was still wearing a formal suit, and his hair was neatly combed back. His necktie was immaculately knotted. The only clue that he had just

been in a vicious fight was the wound at the corner of his mouth. She grew even angrier as she thought about the mess that he had made of Kyle's face.

“Did you have a nice, friendly chat?” he asked, standing at the foot of the bed.

She glared at him, gritting her teeth. “How could you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Kyle's injured. Because of you.”

“It wouldn't have happened if he hadn't barged into your home uninvited.”

“No. You're the one who barged in here, Your Grace. You're the reason it happened.”

Her tear-filled eyes glistened as she glared at him. Showing no particular reaction to the contemptuous look she was giving him, he caressed her hair with an especially tender touch.

“Say it again, Layla.”

“Say what?”

“That you love me.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and faced her. She stared blankly at him for a while, then sighed and turned her head away. He then grabbed her face and turned it towards himself again.

“It was just a lie I told to protect Kyle,” she said.

“I don't care.” A slight smile appeared on his lips. “Lie to me, then.”

“No. Why should I tell such an awful lie again?”

“Awful…?”

“Yes. Horrible. Have I said enough?”

“What a great friend you are to endure such an unpleasant task for him. It makes me want to cry.” Snickering, he grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him.

In an instant, she was right in front of his face. Unlike previously, however, she showed no fear. His eyes grew even colder at her defiant attitude.

“It was for Kyle,” she said, looking straight at the duke.

He looked back at her just as defiantly.

*“Kyle.”*

The sound of her uttering that name made him feel like a stain was being left on his heart.

“If it were for Kyle, I could say it again a thousand times. But not now. I don't want to say it now.”

“You sacrificed your body for Bill Remmer, you sacrificed your heart for Kyle Ettman... What do you think you are, some sort of saint?”

“I would do anything for Uncle Bill or Kyle, even if it means acting like a saint,” she retorted.

She then tried to back away, but he firmly held her near him.

*“I love him.”*

When she thought about the lie that she had stammered out in front of Kyle, she wished that she had bitten her tongue instead. She didn't understand why the duke was so intent on hearing her tell that one lie, when their deal involved her doing plenty of other things.

“Why? Do you need a saint to rescue you?” she asked. She would rather mock him than let him see how much he had hurt her. *Yes, I hate him, so I should find a way to hurt him, somehow. One way or another, I'm going to...*

“Have you eaten dinner?” he suddenly asked.

She was thrown off guard by the unexpected question.

“You should eat something first. And then—”

“What are you saying?” she asked, cutting him off. “Who do you think you are? Because of you, Kyle is injured, and I had to hurt him by telling that horrible lie! And now, you have the audacity to tell me to eat dinner?”

“Layla.”

“Just do it.”

She forcefully shook his hand off her face, then proceeded to remove her blouse. “I understand it all. Anyway, you just came here now to finish what you started with me before.”

As he silently looked at her, she sat on his lap.

*“I love him.”*

That awful lie was still ringing in her ears.

*“I love him.”*

She would have done anything to wipe that memory from her mind.

“So, let's hurry up and get it over with.”

# Chapter 95:
## Light and Shadow

With trembling hands, Layla removed Matthias's overcoat and suit jacket for him. By the time she undid his tie and started unbuttoning his shirt, he couldn't keep his breathing steady anymore.

Letting out a passionate sigh, he flung her down onto the bed. As he got on top of her, the heat and weight of his body came as a relief to her. At that moment, she wanted to have her heart trampled on so that she couldn't feel anything but pain.

*Please, trample all over me,* she thought. *Make me hurt. That's all our relationship is for, after all.*

She clung to him, craving the pain that being with him gave her. She clutched his disheveled hair and ravenously kissed his lips. Instead of being disconcerted by them, she welcomed the moans that seemed to come out of her unbidden.

"Ahh…!"

Soon she was fully nude. He thrust inside her without warning. She writhed underneath him as he pulled back and thrust again.

"Moan for me."

He pulled her hands away from her mouth and pinned them down on the bed. Her body was undulating along with his movements, but her eyes were fixed on him with a cold glare. Thus, it gave him even more of a thrill to hear her panting and moaning rather than saying Kyle's name.

*"I love him."*

Even if it was only a lie she told to protect Kyle, hearing her utter that phrase had driven him wild with pleasure. In an instant, his anger, disappointment, and confusion had all vanished.

Even while he was being insulted, he realized that the lingering memory of that sweet phrase had a grip on him. This made him treat her even more roughly. As he started sucking on her lips, he

could feel her twitching inside. Soon she started gently swaying her hips along with him. In contrast to her movements, there was an innocent look on her face, and her eyes were shut, as though she wasn't aware of what she was doing. This provoked him even more.

“What, are you thinking about him so that you can endure this?” he mockingly asked.

Her long eyelashes fluttered but did not open.

“Open your eyes, Layla,” he said while digging deeper into her.

She gasped and sniffled as her petite body flailed underneath him. Finally she obeyed and reluctantly opened her eyes. Her green irises were full of hatred for him as always. He found the sight of her sweaty, teary-eyed face highly arousing.

No matter how much she hated him, she was his. This fact brought him both comfort and shame at once. Being inside of her made him feel like she was really his. As he pushed deeper and deeper, his feeling of relief increased.

After she closed her eyes again and covered her face with her hands, he coldly said, “Fine. If that's what's going on, then I'll respect your wishes.”

She learned the meaning of his remark from his actions. In an instant, she felt herself being turned over, and then her waist being lifted upwards. After he positioned his large body behind her, she felt herself being jostled even more forcefully than before.

The veins in her hands started popping out as she gripped the sheets with all her might. Her small bedroom was filled with the sound of their flesh pounding together, and with the creaking of her bed, as well as her feverish cries and gasps.

*Good,* she thought to herself. Even as she moaned and writhed, she felt relieved that she was no longer being haunted by the memory of herself saying that she loved the duke. She wanted to clear her mind of everything besides this meaningless relationship.

Soon, the heightening sound of their breathing quieted down. As he lay his sweat-covered torso on top of her limp back, he thought about her running towards Kyle. He thought about how she had

used her own body to block Kyle from further blows, and how for his sake, she had told a lie that she normally would have rather died than tell. Then he thought about how she had blatantly insulted him.

Thinking about this lovely yet detestable woman reignited his lust. Without delay, he started pursuing that bittersweet pleasure once again.

“Go ahead, hate me to your heart's content, Layla.”

He grabbed her hair and forced her to look back at him. Her still hate-filled eyes now looked almost pitiful.

“Even if you hate me, you're still mine,” he said, smirking, before kissing her gasping mouth.

His beautiful mistress even had sweet breath.

*Layla. My wretched mistress Layla.*

* * *

Claudine hesitated in the cottage's front yard for quite a while. She had already guessed what was going to happen when she had started following Matthias, but seeing him actually enter the cottage made her feel pathetic.

She had thought that Duke Herhardt was different from other men, but he appeared to be engaged in an ordinary, banal affair.

She thus didn't understand why she was lingering around this dirty place. Neither did she understand the almost masochistic urge she had to go in and confirm for herself what he was doing.

She unclenched her fists and silently walked up to the cottage's front door. She almost wished that the door would be locked, but to her surprise, it opened without difficulty.

After a moment of deliberation, she stepped over the threshold. The light above the front door was on, but the inside of the house was completely dark. Using the faint light coming in from the porch, she surveyed the interior before noticing a door on the far side of the kitchen.

As she approached the door, she started to hear sounds coming

from behind it—a woman's high-pitched moans and a man's rough grunts.

* * *

The two remained lying side by side on the bed even after enough time had passed for their bodies to cool down and their heart rates to return to normal. Matthias lay on his back, gazing at the ceiling, while Layla lay on her side, staring at the wall.

As Matthias reflected on the wildness with which he had been possessed, a grin appeared on his lips. He didn't understand it, but he didn't mind it either. It was an emotion that he never thought would be part of his life. Filled with sweet confusion, he looked over at Layla's back. She was utterly silent, as though her quietness were a thick shell separating her from him.

He had the urge to forcefully grab her hair and shake her, but when he reached out and touched her, he found himself caressing her with a touch as gentle as the soft light coming from the lamp illuminating the bedroom they were in. He rolled her body over and made her lie on his chest, and suddenly she opened her eyes. His hand felt cool and soft on her skin as he wiped the moisture from her eyes.

She almost tried to push him away, but then she just let her body go slack. She had absolutely no strength remaining. She was so exhausted even keeping her eyes open was too much for her.

As she peacefully shut her eyes, he also felt himself relaxing. Holding her in his arms, he gently kissed her eyelids, her forehead, her cheeks, and her slightly open mouth. With a touch just as gentle as those kisses, he ran his fingers through her sweaty hair and back. She felt relieved that it didn't seem like he was in the mood for anything more than that anymore.

He kissed her dazed face countless more times. He gently rubbed his lips against the bridge of her nose, and playfully nipped at her flushed cheeks. She tried to resist him by closing her eyes and weakly shaking her head, but he just kept going.

“Stop,” she whispered, frowning. Tears again welled up in her beautiful eyes as she looked at him.

“Then say it.”

“Say what...?”

“That you love me.”

He kissed the corners of her eyes.

“If you say it, I'll do whatever you want.”

She could hear him quietly laughing as he licked her tears. Taken aback, she gazed at him. The teardrops fell from her eyes each time she opened them. He lapped up each one before it could fall very far. He wasn't touching her in a rough way anymore, either.

As if to reject the warm, intimate way he was treating her in that moment, she tightly shut her eyes and mouth. She wished that he would just leave, but instead he continued kissing her. He kissed her throat on a spot where he could feel her racing heartbeat, he kissed her trembling shoulders, and he kissed her hair even as he was clutching it.

“Don't cry,” he whispered, kissing the corners of her eyes once again.

Startled by what she had just heard him say, she opened her eyes. “I don't understand...”

“You don't understand what?” he asked.

“Why you would say that.”

“Why?”

“Don't you enjoy seeing me cry?”

Tears continued to fall from her wide-open eyes.

“Sure I do,” he replied, slowly licking up those tears as well. “But even so, I don't want you to cry.”

As much as he still enjoyed the sight of her tears, there was something else he wanted.

“I want you to laugh, Layla.”

“Is that how you get your kicks now?”

“Maybe.”

“Then I'm never going to laugh in front of you.” She shook her

head, sniffling.

He snickered as he listened to her. His handsome, dignified face showed no sign of being offended or hurt.

As she lay in his inescapable embrace, she started sobbing like a small child. She felt like she was in a strange sort of prison. It was chilling and yet somehow cozy.

She had never experienced this sort of peace and tranquility in her life. The fact that he was the one who was making her feel this way made her cry even more sadly.

She had hurt Kyle, and now, in Uncle Bill's cottage, she was being embraced by the man who would become Claudine's husband. She felt dirty.

In this moment, she was causing herself more suffering than she was causing him. *Who does he think he is...?* she thought.

“Someday, I'm going to make *you* cry,” she declared, looking at him with her tear-filled eyes. “I'm going to make you feel horrible and cry.”

He chuckled. “Fine.” Kissing her glistening cheek, he tenderly whispered, “I'll look forward to it.”

She had thought that her words would pierce his heart, but once again, it was she who got hurt.

* * *

After crying for quite a while longer, she dozed off. When she awoke again, the room was suffused with a dim, pre-dawn light. Amazingly, the duke was still there by her side, gazing at her.

“You should go,” she whispered. When he said nothing in response, she asked, “You have to go, don't you?”

He nodded and stood up from the bed. He was already dressed.

She wondered why he had stayed by her side, but she couldn't bring herself to ask him.

After putting on his suit jacket and overcoat, he sat back down on the edge of the bed, then pulled up the covers for her and tucked her in.

She held her breath as she looked at him. He did the same as he looked back at her. Meanwhile, dawn broke, and the room was flooded with bluish light. Now it really was time for him to leave.

He kissed her on the cheek and then stood up. He left at just as leisurely a pace as he had arrived at. The sound of his footsteps grew fainter and then disappeared, leaving her immersed in deep silence.

As she lay staring into space, it occurred to her that his eyes were the same shade of blue as the light coming in through the window. It was the blue that signaled the coming of night and its departure. That man, who had stayed with her only until the darkness fled, had eyes the color of her sadness.

To clear her mind of such thoughts, she buried her face in her pillow. She fell into a light sleep and woke up again a few times. Meanwhile, the sun continued to rise, and the room was flooded with bright light.

She got out of bed later than usual, and immediately took a bath. However, the marks that he had left all over her body only seemed to grow more noticeable as she tried to scrub them away.

Eventually, she gave up and rested her head on her knees. White steam enveloped her as she sat in the hot tub.

After a while, the water-cooled, and the steam vanished. Just then, she heard a loud but polite knock at the front door. She froze, wondering who it could be. Soon she heard a high-pitched voice.

“Miss Llewellyn!”

It was Marie, Claudine's maid.

# Chapter 96:
## An Exception for a Perfect Marriage

Claudine stood under the rose garden's pergola. The morning sunlight peeked through the thorny rose vines covering the pergola and shone on her smiling face.

“The weather is so nice. It feels like spring is just around the corner. Don't you think so, Layla?”

Despite the smile on her lips, her eyes were cold as ice as she turned to look at Layla, who was standing a few paces away with her head lowered.

“Layla?” she repeated.

Layla looked up. Her face looked very pale. Her hair, which still hadn't fully dried after her bath, was in a hasty ponytail. “Yes, Miss,” she finally replied.

Claudine smiled. She still felt that if Duke Herhardt had to have a mistress, Layla wasn't a bad choice. News of a noblewoman's husband having a mistress hardly ever made a splash in aristocratic circles, but the social status of the mistress had a direct effect on the wife's self-esteem. There were many embarrassing cases of noblewomen whose husbands fell in love with a prostitute or a maid. As pitiful as such cases were, they were preferable to the husband having an affair with a high-status woman who could threaten the wife's position.

The most desirable type of woman was, thus, someone who wasn't high-status enough to threaten one's position as a wife while not being too coarse or ill-mannered either. Layla fit the bill perfectly. She was working-class, but she was an intelligent, pretty, and well-mannered teacher. What more could one ask?

There was no way that Claudine could prevent people from gossiping about the perfect gentleman Duke Herhardt having a mistress, but at least she wouldn't have to suffer humiliation twice since Layla was too lowly to threaten her position or act arrogantly.

In fact, it seemed like she could stay his mistress for life without causing much trouble. If Duke Herhardt behaved like his old self, that is.

Claudine laid her handkerchief on the bench and sat down, then gazed around at the garden, which was transitioning from winter to spring. The corsage and ribbons adorning her hat fluttered lightly in the soft breeze.

The previous night, she had stood for a long while in front of the bedroom door in that shabby old cottage. One of the voices she had heard sounded just like Matthias's, but she couldn't believe that the things he was saying were coming from him. She had barely been able to stop herself from opening the door on them.

Now she wondered if it might have been better if she had done so. She felt like seeing it with her own eyes would have been preferable to enduring those dirty sounds from outside the room.

After returning to the mansion, she had stayed up all night, standing in front of the window that looked out onto the path from the cottage. By the time Matthias had finally returned, the sun was already rising.

As he was walking up the steps from the garden to the mansion, he had suddenly stopped and turned around and then had gazed for a long while at the path from which he had just come as if he had left something very precious behind. It was at that moment that Claudine had decided that she couldn't delay any longer.

Matthias was no longer the Matthias that she knew, and it was hard to predict what this new, unfamiliar Matthias would do. The same went for Layla. Claudine couldn't believe that even after Kyle had found out everything, Layla had proceeded to stay with Matthias and sleep with him, crying out like a cat in heat.

“Why are you so nervous?” Claudine asked, removing her gloves and holding them in her hands. “Someone looking at us would think that I was harassing you, Layla. Even though we're just taking a leisurely stroll!” She smiled brightly at Layla.

Layla's face went pale. “I'm sorry. I'm not n-nervous, Miss.”

“Really? Well, that's good to hear,” Claudine replied, shrugging before she adjusted her hat.

Claudine's maid had been very stubborn with Layla when she had come to see her at the cottage. She had continued to knock on the front door and call Layla's name until Layla had finally come running out, at which point she had curtly said, *“Miss Claudine wants to see you.”*

Layla had tried saying that it wasn't a good time, but it was no use.

*“Lady Claudine has ordered you to come to see her, Miss Llewellyn. Right away,”* Marie had said politely but very coldly.

In the end, Layla rushed to get dressed and followed Marie towards the garden's walking path, where Claudine had been waiting for her with a warm smile on her face as if she were greeting a friend.

While Claudine sat on the bench, gazing into the distance, Layla stood next to her in silence for a long while. The silence was finally broken by the sound of a bracelet falling onto the stone pavement. Claudine squinted as she looked down at her platinum bracelet glittering in the sunlight. The clasp appeared to have broken.

“Could you pick that up for me, Layla?”

“Pardon...?” Layla replied, looking at Claudine.

Claudine looked right back at her. Layla soon grasped her meaning.

A grin appeared on Claudine's face as she watched Layla quietly walk over to the bracelet. Just as she stooped over to pick it up, Claudine gently stepped on it, pinning the bracelet and Layla's hand under her shoe.

“M-miss Claudine?” Layla said, looking up from her position, kneeling in front of Claudine.

“You can have the bracelet,” Claudine said, pressing her foot down harder. “Why do you have that look on your face?”

Showing no sign of pain, Layla just stared back at her with quivering, unfocused eyes.

“I thought you would've liked being given something of mine,” Claudine said, taking her foot off Layla's hand.

However, Layla remained to kneel with her hand on the ground.

“You like my things. Isn't that right?” Claudine asked, looking straight into Layla's eyes and speaking very slowly and deliberately as if she were teaching a child to speak.

Layla's lips twitched, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything in response. Her eyes looked like those of a prisoner being led to the gallows.

When Claudine saw this, she started to feel real pity for her. “Don't give me that look, Layla.” Slowly bending forward, she extended her smooth, cold arm and put her hand against Layla's ashen cheek. “You're stealing my man, and yet you're acting all high and mighty about a paltry piece of jewelry? It's ridiculous, don't you think?”

As she whispered into Layla's ear, her voice was as sweet as the scent of roses that would be filling the garden once summer rolled around.

* * *

Claudine's maid Marie stood at the edge of the garden, keeping an eye on the mansion’s balcony.

Claudine's instructions had been simple. She was to let her know if, by some chance, Duke Herhardt returned home early. The task itself was simple, but Marie had inferred that the reasons for it were anything but.

However, she didn't understand why Claudine so urgently wanted to talk with that lowly orphan.

She tried to eavesdrop on their conversation, but the pergola where they were talking was too far from the walking path for that.

She didn't know what they were talking about, but she hoped that Claudine was cutting that sassy girl down to size.

Layla had rubbed her the wrong way since the first day she had seen her when they were children. She frowned just thinking about

it. *How dare she?* She had always behaved stiffly around Marie and had never acted grateful, even when she was given money.

Marie clicked her tongue, then shifted her gaze back to the mansion. The duke was at a social club meeting, so he probably wouldn't be back home until dinnertime at the earliest. However, it would have been foolish to risk repeating the same mistake they had made when he returned from his trip a day early and caught Claudine and Marie in that awkward situation with Layla. Thus, she was keeping her eyes peeled for any signs of his return.

* * *

Layla couldn't bring herself to stand up. She couldn't even lift a finger. Or rather, the thought of moving hadn't even occurred to her. Even though she was intently watching and listening, everything seemed hazy and dreamlike. If it was a dream, it was the worst nightmare she could imagine.

“Poor girl, you're shaking,” Claudine said, caressing her cheek. “Don't worry, Layla. Are you afraid I'll do something to you? Why would I do anything to someone that my fiancé likes so much?”

She slid her hand down to Layla's chin and gently lifted it. There was a look of innocent amusement in her eyes as she scrutinized Layla's face.

“To tell the truth, I don't hate you, Layla. In fact, I pity you. I know that this isn't just your fault.”

“Miss Claudine...” Layla said, tears forming in her eyes.

“What? Are you going to cry for me too? I don't think that will have much of an effect on me. You should save up those tears so that you can moan and cry for Duke Herhardt. He seemed to like that.” In an instant, the cheerful smile left Claudine's face and was replaced by icy seriousness.

Layla could barely manage to breathe. Not wanting to accept what Claudine was implying, she silently prayed, *Please, don't let it be true.*

“You know, Layla, there was a maid like that a long time ago.”

She let go of Layla's chin and started patting her head like she was a puppy.

“Her lady was a daughter from a high-ranking noble family. She slept with her lady's fiancé and then told her all about it. Since a noblewoman would never sleep with someone before marriage, her loyal maid did it for her instead. Perhaps we can think of our situation in the same way. I'll be grateful for your service.”

Claudine calmly watched the last glimmer of light vanish from Layla's eyes.

Once again, she imagined Layla as a prisoner being hanged. She felt excited as she imagined never having to hear that bird squawking again. She didn't like the idea of getting down in the mud with working-class people like Layla, but she could make an exception if it would make for a perfect marriage.

“I was really surprised. My fiancé is normally so cold that I would've thought he wouldn't shed a single drop of sweat in bed. But apparently, he's quite passionate, no?”

Layla lost balance and hunched forward, using both her hands to support her body. Her head also slumped forward, but Claudine had no intention of letting her attention slip away.

“So, I need you to tell me, Layla. You do have a duty to report to me, after all. How is he? He's so cold and aloof normally, but what's he like in bed? Judging from the lilting sound of your moans, I would guess that I have a lot to look forward to. Am I right about that?”

She clutched Layla's hair and made her look at her while she looked at Layla with an air of innocent curiosity.

“Is he good? As good as it sounded like?”

Layla's normally bright, intelligent eyes looked glazed over like a dead person's. Claudine was pleased to see this, even if she would have preferred if Layla had shed tears as well. There was still time for that, though.

Claudine looked up at the fluffy clouds floating in the sky, then looked at Layla again. “Poor Layla, tell me, okay? Tell me right now

if you enjoyed being with the man who ruined your life."

# Chapter 97:
## The Man Who Ruined Your Life

*"The man who ruined your life..."*

Even while Layla was too stunned to hear anything else, that phrase kept scratching at her like a needle.

Observing the agitated look in her eyes, Claudine put on a look of surprise and said, "Goodness, did you not know? In order to have you for himself, Duke Herhardt played a part in sabotaging your engagement to Kyle Ettman."

Even though Claudine was no longer clutching her hair, Layla was still looking up at her face.

Claudine found the unknowing expression on Layla's face almost cute. "You're just the same as you've always been, Layla," she said. She grinned at Layla in the same reluctant way she had grinned back when they were children when she had resented having to play with the orphan girl. "Poor, ignorant Layla."

* * *

Like a mother telling her daughter a bedtime story, Claudine recounted the whole story of what her fiancé had done to Layla and Kyle the previous summer. There was no need for her to add anything—the story as it had actually happened was devastating enough.

She told Layla how Mrs. Ettman had bribed her own cousin, Daniel Raynor, to steal Layla's tuition money, and how, even though Matthias had definitely seen Daniel by the river, he had lied about it to the police. Nor did she omit the fact that Matthias had had his assistant investigate Daniel's financial troubles. She had found out about this by doing some digging of her own, using her father's name.

"Duke Herhardt probably figured out that Daniel Raynor had stolen the money and that Mrs. Ettman had put him up to it. Once

he knew that, it wouldn't have been hard to guess why she had wanted to carry out the scheme in the first place. He's quite intelligent and meticulous, as I'm sure you know."

The more Claudine said, the blanker the look on Layla's face became until no signs remained of her usual intelligence.

"I don't know exactly what happened after that. But considering how perfectly everything unfolded leading to Mrs. Ettman's crimes being discovered, it's hard to imagine that Duke Herhardt wasn't involved, don't you think?"

Claudine was very pleased with herself for not having revealed what she knew earlier. It enabled her to use her best weapon at just the right time.

"Of course, we mustn't rush to conclusions. If you're curious about what happened afterwards, you should ask Duke Herhardt yourself. If you doubt any of the things I've told you, you can check them with him as well. Whatever his other failings, he's not the type to lie."

Unable to keep looking at Claudine, Layla let her head drop. Her knuckles had gone white as she firmly clutched the stone pavement.

She thought back to the previous summer. After she and Kyle had gotten engaged, the duke had mostly stopped interacting with her. It was as if he had lost all interest in her. He had started pestering her again right around when the scandal with Mrs. Ettman had come a close, just at the start of autumn. Had it all been part of his plan? She shook her head, not wanting to believe that a person could be that cruel.

"I get it. You don't want to believe it. After all, it would make you miserable to believe that he ruined your life just so that he could have you," Claudine said, as if she were reading Layla's mind.

"If you don't want to believe it, then don't. Suit yourself. It's your right. The truth of the matter won't change depending on whether you believe it, but I understand wanting to choose the less distressing option."

She stood up from the bench and stepped in front of Layla, who

was still crouched on the ground, trembling nervously.

“Still, it relieves me to know that you didn't know about any of this. Otherwise, I would have seen you as a shamelessly materialistic woman who acted as Duke Herhardt's mistress despite knowing all that he had done. Of course, I feel a little bad now that I know.”

Claudine stooped over and clutched Layla's shoulders.

“I'm sorry, Layla. If I hadn't just sat idly by and watched my fiancé make that bad decision, you could be Kyle Ettman's beloved wife right now instead of you being the duke's mistress.”

Layla's lips twitched, but she still couldn't bring herself to say anything. She didn't have the strength to shake Claudine's hand away, either.

“But what's done is done. Luckily, Duke Herhardt seems to be treating you really well, so I guess it's not all bad.” The smile returned to Claudine's face. “In any case, Layla, I think that you and I will be getting along very well going forward. Since my fiancé likes you so much, I owe you some respect as well. So don't feel so guilty. However, it would be ridiculous for us to live on the same estate after I get married, so I trust that you'll leave Arvis before then. Knowing Duke Herhardt, I'm sure he's already found a place for you to live, so I don't need to worry about that, right?”

She patted Layla's head once more, then took a step back and stood up straight. Crouching in Claudine's shadow, Layla looked even smaller and humbler.

“Stand up, Layla. As Duke Herhardt's mistress, you should carry yourself with dignity.”

Layla struggled to balance as she stood up, so Claudine kindly helped her.

“Now, Layla, I want you to bow to me,” Claudine said in a warm, gentle voice as though she were talking to a child. “If we are to be on good terms going forward, then we need to treat each other with appropriate decorum, don't you think?”

Perhaps she was behaving a bit coldly, considering that Layla was

pale in the face and barely able to stand up, but Claudine had decided to behave as though she were already Duchess Herhardt.

Looking up at her with red eyes, Layla labored to bow her head. From the look on her face, she seemed barely cognizant of where she was or what she was doing.

“Again,” Claudine coldly commanded, narrowing her eyes. “Do it properly, Layla.” *That awful girl,* Claudine thought, frustrated that Layla still wasn't crying.

Layla put her trembling hands together and bowed once again, more deeply this time. When she did, large drops of what seemed to be her tears dripped onto her shoes. One drop, then another, then several in quick succession. Seeing that she was finally crying, Claudine felt more generous again and stepped back. “There, that's a good girl.”

Layla's second attempt at proper decorum had been no better than the first, but Claudine no longer cared. Layla once again collapsed to the ground. She looked like a worn-out doll.

Leaving her there, Claudine walked away from the pergola. She decided to ignore the flood of shame and disappointment she was feeling in herself. She was fine with being cold or even cruel if it was for an important cause. This was something she had learned was necessary for the life she wanted to lead.

As she reached the walking path that went around the garden, she looked back. Slumped on the cold ground, Layla was silently weeping.

With an even more relaxed expression on her face, Claudine turned the corner and walked down the path that passed through the rose bed in the center of the garden. When she arrived at the marble staircase, her maid happily walked up to her.

Before the maid could ask her anything, Claudine said, “Pack up my things, Marie.”

“Your things? Are we going back to the House of Brandt?”

“Yes, we have to.”

“Wouldn't you rather wait for His Grace to return first so that you

can greet him before you leave?"

"Just do as I say," Claudine insisted, smiling.

Her loyal maid lowered her head submissively and went off to fulfill her lady's command.

With her head held high, Claudine elegantly ascended the steps. She was confident that everything was falling into place. All would be right again before summer, if not before the height of spring.

* * *

The same day that Bill Remmer returned to Karlsbar, Kyle Ettman left. Just as there had been lots of gossips when Kyle had come home at the start of his winter break, his sudden departure caused rumors to spread around the town in a flash. Naturally, Layla was part of these rumors as well.

"He came back without warning, and now he's left without warning. I guess Layla didn't have a change of heart. How sad."

"Who knows, maybe he really only came back home to see his parents."

"No way. I've heard things are quite awkward between him and his mother lately."

"They used to be so close! But sure, Mrs. Ettman was quite mean to Layla, wasn't she?"

The maids' chat session was cut short by the sound of a service bell ringing. Duke Herhardt had rung the bell from his office on the third floor. It seemed that his guest had arrived.

The maids nervously went off to their respective stations. The most experienced maid among them took the tea tray and hurried up the stairs.

Duke Herhardt actually wasn't a particularly picky master. In fact, he was probably the most easygoing member of his family. Nonetheless, for some reason the Arvis staff felt more nervous serving him than they did serving his fastidious mother or grandmother. Everyone felt this way, from the butler down to the lowliest maid. Therefore, when the duke's service bell rang,

everyone got to work much more quickly than they did when someone else summoned them.

Reaching the office door, the maid knocked and immediately heard the duke's gentle, quiet voice.

“Come in.”

Her eyes widened when she entered the office. The guest sitting across from the duke was none other than Bill Remmer, the gardener who had ruined Arvis's heaven.

* * *

Layla stood next to one of the walls of the greenhouse, the restoration of which was well underway.

All the rare and exotic plants that Bill had acquired during his exhaustive tour of the empire's greenhouses had been airlifted to Arvis, and Bill's garden helpers were placing them in the greenhouse. It was going to take quite a long time to restore everything to how it had been before the accident, but it seemed like, at the latest, the job would be finished by the time of the duke's wedding in the summer.

Holding her hands tightly together, Layla took several deep breaths to try to calm herself down.

She had made a large meal with several of Bill's favorite dishes, but before he could even sit down to it, he had been summoned to the mansion. The servant had told him that the order had come from the duke himself. Not thinking much of it, Bill had happily followed after the servant. Layla, on the other hand, had immediately been gripped with anxiety.

“I thought you were a fully-grown young lady, but now I see you're still a little girl who follows her uncle around,” one of the garden helpers teased.

Layla quickly got rid of the anxious expression on her face and turned towards him, smiling. “I just really missed him.”

The garden helpers chuckled at her response, then went into the greenhouse. Now that she was alone again, the smile vanished from

her face.

Looking up at the mansion, she fervently hoped that the duke wasn't breaking his promise and telling Uncle Bill about their deal.

A torrent of emotions passed through her—shame, confusion, sadness, and pain—eventually leaving only one feeling inside her. That one remaining emotion felt like a shard of ice piercing her heart. It was hatred.

# Chapter 98:
## I Learned It From You

“Please, have a sip, Mr. Remmer,” Matthias said, noticing that Bill hadn't touched his tea.

Still unaware of why he had been summoned, Bill looked nervous, but he immediately followed the duke's order and picked up his teacup.

“You've done excellent work for us for a long time. Thank you,” Matthias said.

“N-not at all, Your Grace,” Bill replied, shaking his head at the unexpected compliment. “I should be thanking you for giving me a chance to restore the greenhouse after I caused the accident that destroyed it. And I'm not just saying that. I'm sincerely grateful.”

He bowed his head once again to show his thanks to the duke. The simple fact that Duke Herhardt had saved him from prison by dropping the charges against him already weighed heavily on Bill's mind. As far as he was concerned, the duke was his savior, and he would feel deep gratitude for him for the rest of his life.

Delaying no further, Matthias proceeded to get right to the point. “Once the restoration of Arvis's greenhouse is complete, what would you say to working at the Herhardt mansion in the capital?”

It was a decision the duke had come to after long deliberation. He knew that Layla valued Bill Remmer over her own life. If Bill were to move to Ratse, there was no doubt that she would go with him.

“Because of the accident?” Bill asked, looking flustered. “I knew that it was ridiculous for me to expect to be able to keep living and working here at Arvis after I caused that accident, even though you dropped the charges against me. But still...”

“It's not just because of the accident.” Matthias set down his teacup and sat up in his chair. “The garden here at Arvis is so large. I think it will soon be more than a man your age can manage.”

“But...” Bill wanted to disagree, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything. The duke wasn't wrong, after all. Bill was getting on in years, and the vastness of Arvis's garden made it a challenge for any gardener.

“The Ratse mansion's garden is more modestly sized, so it will be easier for you to take care of. I trust that you will be able to make the garden there just as beautiful as the one here at Arvis.”

“I don't know how to respond to such incredible generosity, Your Grace,” Bill said, his face turning red. “But I couldn't accept your offer, as moving as it is.”

“Then, would you like to continue working at Arvis?”

“Oh, no, I already knew that would be impossible the day that you dropped the charges against me. What I've been thinking is, I'll help restore the greenhouse, and then once that's complete, I'll resign, and Layla and I will leave Arvis. It's the only honorable thing to do.”

“I didn't offer you mercy for no reason,” the duke said in a colder tone of voice.

Bill awkwardly set down his teacup and looked at the young, handsome lord of Arvis.

“I dropped the charges against you because you deserved to have them dropped. You needn't feel indebted to me for that. Likewise, I'm offering you the position at the Ratse mansion out of recognition of your immense skill and experience, Mr. Remmer.”

“Well I'm incredibly grateful, Your Grace, but I could never move to the capital and leave Layla behind.”

“Miss Llewellyn can go with you.”

“She can?!” Bill asked, looking ready to faint from surprise.

The duke, however, remained calm. His words seemed not to have been impulsive. “The Herhardt family would like to become Miss Llewellyn's sponsor.”

“Her s-sponsor...? You mean you'll pay for her to go to college?”

“That's right,” the duke replied, nodding. “After the unfortunate theft that you suffered last year, my grandmother made it clear that

she wanted to pay for Miss Llewellyn's tuition. Things were too chaotic at the time, so nothing came of it last year, but if she can pass the entrance examination again, we will formally sponsor her. It's my grandmother's wish, and I fully support it."

Bill was in utter shock. He couldn't believe that only a few months after he had caused a huge accident and barely avoided prison, he was now being showered with good fortune. He felt like he was dreaming. The duke's face remained cold. "What do you say, Mr. Remmer?"

* * *

"Uncle Bill!" Layla shouted, running excitedly up to Bill.

Bill smiled warmly back at her, in the way that an adult smiles at an over-excited child. He patted her head just as warmly and said, "Why'd you follow me all the way here? I told you to wait for me at the cottage."

Layla let out a long sigh of relief.

The two of them walked side-by-side to the cottage. After they sat down at the dinner table, he started telling her why the duke had summoned him.

"So, Layla, His Grace made me a very appealing offer."

"An... offer?"

"Yeah. He said that before this summer rolls around, he'd like me to move to Ratse and start doing the gardening for his mansion there. And he says that you can come along with me." He had a very excited expression on his face as he said this. "He had me come see him just so he could make the offer in person, can you believe it? Oh, and there's another thing having to do with you. He says that the Herhardt family wants to become your sponsor!"

"My sponsor...?"

"Yeah, he said that if you pass this year's college entrance exam in the capital, he'll pay for your tuition. He said it was his grandmother's idea. Layla, you're such a smart girl, even the Herhardt family knows it." He gazed at her with a face full of pride.

“So what do you say, should we accept the offer?”

“Uncle Bill...”

“I'm the one who caused the accident, so you don't need to worry about me. I'm fine with any arrangement if it means that you'll be able to study to your heart's content.”

Layla's eyes started to sting, and her throat felt like it was closing up, so she hurriedly took a big gulp of water. She kept her head down for a long while, feeling too ashamed to look Bill in the face.

Her meeting with Claudine the previous day felt like the distant past. She could barely recall how she had managed to pull herself together and return to the cottage. All she remembered was writhing on the floor and crying after she had gotten home.

She had wailed loudly and shed tears for what felt like an eternity until she was finally too exhausted to continue. She had then lain lifelessly on the floor for a while until she was spurred to stand up by an urge to reject what Claudine had told her.

She had then headed to the Raynor residence. She didn't care about how awkward it might be to meet the man who had stolen her tuition money. If talking to Daniel Raynor could prove to her that Claudine had been lying about the duke, then she was more than willing to take the chance.

Without even thinking about what she was going to say, she had knocked on the door. As soon as Daniel had opened the door, a look of extreme shock had appeared on his face.

Before he could shut the door in her face, she had pleaded, *“Just one thing. Please just tell me one thing! The day you stole the tuition money from my house, did you see the duke?”*

She had instantly regretted asking the question, although she knew that regretting would do her no good.

*“Yes, I did,”* Daniel had replied with a bitter expression on his face. *“Though I don't know why you would want to revisit that day.”* He had then started blushing and had avoided making eye contact with her.

He had made a few more comments about how he was

uncomfortable talking about the incident now that everything had been wrapped up, but she had already stopped listening.

After she staggered a few steps backward, he had quickly closed and locked the door. Rather than crying, she had let out a few bitter chuckles, and then had turned back onto the darkened road.

The police had said that after extensive investigations, they had failed to find a single witness from the day of the theft. Now the puzzle pieces were all coming together, and she could no longer deny it.

Claudine hadn't been lying. Layla had already intuited that this was the case while she was listening to Claudine speak. After all, becoming the next Duchess Herhardt was Claudine's life goal. She wouldn't have risked it by doing something careless. She already knew that Layla was the duke's mistress, so she wouldn't tell a lie knowing that Layla could check its veracity with the duke himself.

“Layla?”

She snapped out of her daze at the sound of Bill's voice.

“Sure, I know it can't be easy to make up your mind right away about something like this.”

“What? Oh... yeah.”

Luckily, Bill seemed to think that she was simply flustered by the duke's unexpected offer.

“But I want you to seriously consider it, Layla. I saved up for your tuition because I wanted to give you wings so that you could fly off to happiness. Sadly, I couldn't do that for you. But now His Grace is giving you wings in my stead.”

*No, Uncle Bill,* she thought, forcing a smile while internally, she felt like crying. *The duke brutally clipped my wings.*

“If you let the Herhardts give you those wings, you'll fly so high, I just know it. Higher than anyone else, man or woman. I'm sure of it.” His face was bright with confidence.

She took another sip of water to wet her dry lips and smiled brightly back at her uncle.

* * *

After dinner, Bill and Layla sat on the porch and drank coffee. The night breeze was still a bit chilly, but it was bearable.

Layla tried her hardest to stay relaxed. Luckily, Bill was quite tired from traveling, so he went to bed early. As soon as he did, she was able to drop the painful smile that she had struggled to keep up for him. As soon as she went into her own room and shut the door, Phoebe showed up at the window with a note from the duke.

Layla read the note with a calmness that surprised even herself. The duke's command was the same as always. However, she no longer felt scared or upset by it.

She was going to disappear before Duke and Duchess Herhardt were married. She decided this just as her tears had dried. However, she wasn't going to behave like she had up to now.

After thoroughly ripping up the duke's note, she walked over to the closet and put on the dress and shoes he had bought her. Then she unbraided her hair and carefully combed it, to make herself look very nice for him.

*I'm not going to ask any questions.*

She looked at herself in the mirror with cold, determined eyes.

*I'm going to tear your heart to pieces, just like you did to me. I know how to do that. I learned it from you.*

As she made this resolution, she felt a strange sort of excitement building in her chest.

It wasn't going to be hard. She knew more about destroying someone emotionally than anyone else. All she had to do was treat him the way he had treated her.

First, she would make him a promise that was impossible to keep, build up his expectations, and make him dream a beautiful dream. Then she would shatter his heart and stab him with the pieces of it.

She slowly closed and opened her eyes, then tiptoed out of the cottage.

The duke was going to writhe on the ground, crying in pain and misery, just like she had.

# Chapter 99:
## One Condition

Matthias was slightly taken aback when he opened the cabin's door. The Layla standing shyly in front of him looked different from normal. For one thing, she was wearing the outfit he had bought for her.

After a moment, she meekly asked, “May I come in?”

Stepping aside to allow her to enter, he said, “Wait one moment.” He then walked off in the direction not of the bedroom, but of the drawing room.

She quietly followed behind him. The drawing room's table was covered with several stacks of documents.

“Looks like you're busy,” she commented.

“A little,” he replied.

“Should I go, then?”

“No.” Chuckling as he took a seat on the sofa, he opened a file he had been looking at before she came. After a moment, he looked up at her and said, “If you're tired, you can take a short nap.”

“No thanks,” she replied, standing on the other side of the table. Her long hair slowly swayed as she shook her head. “I'll just wait.” She then sat down on a chair facing him.

He felt slightly disconcerted by her attitude, which seemed neither aggressive nor downcast. He had expected that she would have been muttering Kyle's name to provoke him, but she was doing nothing of the sort. He found her strange behavior suspicious, but he decided not to question it. He really didn't mind it. Whatever the reason was, she was acting docile, not unlike his canary, and he liked it.

With a slight grin on his face, he continued looking over his documents. The drawing room was silent, other than the sound of pages turning and the crackling of the fire in the fireplace. It was very tranquil, like the feeling of being carried along in a gentle

stream.

To avoid distracting him from his work, she picked up a newspaper from the table and started reading it. The page was open to an article about how the tense international situation was causing fluctuations in the resources market.

After staring at the indecipherable page for a short while, she set down the paper. Looking up, she saw Matthias engrossed in his work. She looked closely at his face, which was being illuminated by the gentle glow of the fire.

He was just sitting cross-legged and looking over documents, but there was a striking intensity even in his relaxed posture and slight movements. Perhaps it was the arrogance that came from having had the world at his command his whole life.

*Will I be able to pull it off?* Suddenly she felt nervous and started biting her lip. *Can a nobody like me really manage to break his heart?*

She gulped uneasily. Just then, he lifted his head and looked askance at her. This startled her, but she didn't avoid making eye contact with him.

He looked intently at her for a moment, then let out a soft chuckle. At that moment, she felt hope. All of a sudden, she realized that it was a good thing that he desired her so ardently. Even if it was only lust, the stronger his feelings for her, the more devastating the heartbreak would be.

She didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before. She herself could become the dagger that she would use to pierce that perfect gentleman's heart.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and then opened them and looked at his face. It was the face of the coldhearted man who had stolen her first kiss, and then a few days later had gotten engaged to Claudine. It was the face of the cruel man who had used a dirty, cowardly trick to stop her from marrying Kyle, and had forced her to sleep with him. It was also the face of the handsome devil who would soon have a lavish wedding.

“What are you plotting?” he suddenly asked, narrowing his eyes

at her while grinning slightly.

“I heard that you ordered Uncle Bill to move to Ratse with me,” she said, clasping her hands together on her lap.

Without hesitating, he nodded. “It wasn't so much of an order as an offer.”

“Surely you realized that it would be hard for him to refuse the offer. You're just using him so that you can continue having me as your mistress after you're married.”

“Am I?”

“You're truly a bad person,” she said in a shaky but strong voice.

He set down the file folder he was holding and slowly tilted his head as he looked at her. She had come to the cabin looking different from her usual self and was now saying unpredictable things. This piqued his interest.

“Do you know how bad of a person you are?” she asked, blinking her moist eyes quickly.

He implicitly accepted the reproach by not disputing it.

“Then you must also realize how much I hate you, yes?” she asked. Her eyes were growing moist with tears.

He let out a hollow laugh, thinking, *She's back to her old ways.* By raising his hopes, she had also deepened his desire. He loosened his tie.

“Since you know it all,” she continued, “you must also know this.”

Fully expecting her usual words of resentment—“*I hate you”; “I despise you”; “I'll never forgive you”*—he was completely caught off guard by what she actually said.

“You must know that, even though you're such a bad, detestable person, I love you.”

“What...?” he replied, furrowing his brow.

“I love you,” she quietly repeated, taking in the look of doubt and confusion on his face. “You're a bad person worthy of hatred, and yet I love you nonetheless. When I said that in front of Kyle, it wasn't a lie. I love you. I love you so much that I hate myself for it.”

Her voice was now quivering slightly as she spoke. *Will he fall for my terrible acting?* she wondered, remembering how he had criticized her after the school play.

Her extreme uneasiness turned into fear, and then the fear caused the tears to start falling from her eyes. Meanwhile, Matthias's deep-blue eyes remained fixed on her, revealing nothing of his inner feelings.

“And so... I'll do as you say. I'll move to the capital with Uncle Bill. I was embarrassed to think of living that way before, so I wanted to escape, but I don't think I could anymore.” She looked intently at him.

He slowly stood up and walked towards her.

“So just like that, you're okay with being my mistress?” he asked in a voice so cold as to sound heartless.

She lowered her head in embarrassment, but it was no use. He lifted her chin and made her look at him again. She felt overwhelmed by his searching gaze as he stared at her.

Feeling unable to speak, she simply nodded her head. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, and she hoped he couldn't hear it. *Please, Layla,* she thought to herself, *please succeed in fooling him with this lie!*

Gripping his arm with her trembling hand, she said, “I'll d-do it on one condition.”

“A condition?”

“Yes. I don't accept deals that I get nothing out of. I learned that from someone.”

The doubtful look on his face softened considerably at this remark, which gave her the courage to go on.

“Are you going to accept my condition?” she asked.

“Tell me what it is.”

“I want you to promise first.”

“You want me to promise to accept a condition on a deal without knowing what the condition is?” he asked, frowning. “Why should I? Who are you to demand that of me?”

“I'm Layla,” she replied, not backing down. “I'm your Layla.”

He chuckled at her bold reply. All she could do now was pray internally that her ploy would succeed.

For a moment, he looked out the window and saw the starry night sky reflected in the river. His gaze then slowly shifted back inside, passing over the paintings covering the wall, and came to a stop on her face, which he stared at deeply. “Tell me the condition, Layla.”

“Does that mean you promise to accept it?” She pleadingly tightened her grip on his arm, like a child pestering her parent.

He chuckled once again. “Sure.” He let go of her chin and cupped her cheek. As he gazed into her joyful, light-green eyes, his smile grew much warmer. “I promise.”

* * *

“You're sending Bill Remmer to the Ratse mansion?” Dowager Herhardt asked, looking at her grandson with surprise.

Her daughter-in-law, Elise von Herhardt, who had been calmly enjoying the music they were listening to, soon put on a shocked expression as well.

Matthias alone remained calm, despite having caused the stir himself. “Yes, that's the plan.”

“That's a very sudden and unexpected thing to do, Matthias.”

“Mother has been displeased with Mr. Remmer ever since the accident. And besides, Mr. Remmer is getting to be too old to handle being in charge of Arvis's large garden.”

“That's true, but...” As Elise trailed off, she looked to her mother-in-law for support.

However, Dowager Herhardt couldn't dispute the points Matthias had made either.

While his mother and grandmother were reduced to silence, Matthias took a sip of coffee. Now that Layla had made up her mind, there was no need for further delay. There was no particular need to hide his relationship with her, either.

The condition she had requested was not what he had expected at all: *"I want us to be lovers."* With a very sad expression on her face, she had gone on. *"Once you're married, I'll have to leave Arvis. I'll never be able to return here."*

He couldn't dispute the point. Arvis was the Herhardt family's home base, and thus it was under the purview of the proper lady of the house, the duchess. This rule had never been broken in the history of the family, and there was no way it would be broken going forward. There was no place in Arvis for a mistress. Matthias was well aware of that.

*"And so, until you get married, while we can still be together here at Arvis, I want us to be lovers."*

He wasn't sure what the difference between a mistress and a lover was, but it seemed that to Layla, they were as distinct as night and day.

*"Just once, before I'm hidden in the shadows forever, I want to have the experience of being lovers with someone."*

He vividly recalled the way she had looked as she whispered that with tears in her eyes.

*Shadows.* There was no word that fit that woman less. She seemed like she was made out of the brightest, most beautiful rays of sunlight. He had been charmed by that light. It had blinded him. Wanting to live in that light, he had seized it for himself. He couldn't let it go.

But now he was realizing that this longing of his meant that she would have to live in the shadows. The realization came as a shock to him. *If you're in the shadows forever, will you still shine like you do now?* This unpleasant question had popped into his mind, causing him to suddenly embrace Layla tightly. It was as if he thought that holding her close to himself would keep her light shining forever.

His reverie was interrupted by the sound of his mother clearing her throat. "The points you've made are true, Matthias, but I think it's too hasty of a decision. If you send Bill Remmer to Ratse, what will become of his adopted daughter?"

“She will move to Ratse with Mr. Remmer. And our family is going to pay for her college tuition, Mother.”

“You're sending her to college? Our family is sponsoring the gardener's adopted daughter?”

“Yes. As I recall, Grandmother already expressed her intention to do so last year.”

He looked to his grandmother for confirmation.

She was unable to deny it. “Yes. I did say that.”

Having previously offered to pay for Layla's college tuition as a gift, Dowager Herhardt had reiterated her willingness to become Layla's sponsor after her tuition money was stolen.

A slight smile appeared on Matthias's lips. “I think it can thus be said that both of your intentions will be met if we have Bill Remmer transfer to the Ratse mansion, and we sponsor his adopted daughter's college education.”

The two women exchanged glances. Neither of them could find any way to refute Matthias's point.

“Then I will proceed with carrying out both of your wills.”

He bowed respectfully and left the drawing room. He had a busy afternoon schedule and had to depart at once. He could easily guess what his mother and grandmother would say to each other after he left. However, he didn't care.

He calmly walked down the hallway, thinking of the word *shadows*. The more he thought about it, the less it seemed to suit Layla.

# Chapter 100:
## Do You Really Think I'm Pretty?

Winter break came to an end, and Layla was reunited with her students. Many of them had grown noticeably during the interim. Unfortunately, their unruliness had also grown, which made for a hectic first day back.

"Miss Llewellyn! I finished all the problems!" a boy shouted, holding his slate up in the air.

Startled out of her momentary reverie, Layla walked over and took the slate from him. "Wow, you're done already? You must have practiced your arithmetic during the break!"

The young boy beamed at her praise and started blushing.

As soon as she had graded the boy's quiz and handed it back to him, Monica burst into tears. The boy sitting behind her had started pulling on her ponytail. Layla consoled Monica, scolded the boy, and resumed class.

The long first day of school progressed in this manner before finally coming to an end.

After seeing off the students, she returned to the classroom, which looked like a warzone. Sitting at her desk, she looked out the window and saw yellowish-green leaves just starting to sprout from the tree branches. At this point, one still had to look closely to see the signs of the change of seasons, but it wouldn't be long before the whole landscape would be transformed into spring. Before that happened, she had to finish her plan.

She picked up her bag to leave. The mere thought of being lovers with someone as demonic as the duke made her shudder, but since she knew that the sweeter the lie she told was, the deeper the pain he would feel, she was able to endure it.

She had been so delighted after the first night she deceived him, she had barely been able to get to sleep. It was the first happiness he had ever given her.

Before exiting the classroom, she let down her hair and put on some light makeup. Despite all her practice, she couldn't get the makeup to look like she wanted it to, which disappointed her. She thought about wiping it off, but there wasn't much time left before her date.

She felt dirty dolling herself up for that horrible man. To rid herself of the feeling, she forced a smile, telling herself, *Make the prettiest smile you can because your smile will turn into the poison that you'll use to bring him down.*

* * *

Matthias brought his car to a stop near the corner by the village school. It was his first time driving in quite a while, but he hadn't forgotten how. Of course, when he had told them he was going out driving on his own, his assistant and his chauffeur had reacted like they were witnessing the end of the world.

He checked his watch, then looked out the car window at the school. Just in time, Layla came walking out of the school. Her golden hair fluttered with each step as she strode down the sidewalk.

He calmly watched the quiet, busily moving woman. Ever since he had first seen her all those years earlier, she had always reminded him of a small bird nimbly flying through the air.

Apparently she hadn't expected that he would be waiting for her because even as she passed right in front of the car, she didn't slow down her walking pace at all. He tapped on the car window to summon his busy bird.

She flinched and came to a stop. Confusion soon spread across her face.

Chuckling, he opened the door and got out of the car. She reflexively took a step back, then looked at him with her head slightly cocked. “Your Grace... what are you doing here? This isn't where we were supposed to meet.”

“Why do you think I might be here?”

“Did you come here to pick me up?” She peered inside the car. “Did you drive here yourself?” she asked, looking as shocked as his chauffeur had looked earlier.

He walked around the front of the car and opened the passenger door. Holding the strap of her bag tightly, she hesitantly walked towards him.

Once she was closer, he noticed that her face looked a little different from normal. “Are you wearing makeup?” he asked, sounding amused.

It was an innocent question, but she reacted like a child who had been caught being naughty. “Does it look weird?” she asked.

“A little,” he impishly replied.

Feeling self-conscious, she bit her lip and started blushing. After a moment, she took a handkerchief out of her bag.

Grabbing her wrist to stop her, he added, “There's no need to wipe it off, though.”

“But you said it looks weird.”

“It does.”

“Then I'm going to wipe it off.”

“You look pretty.”

“If my makeup looks weird, how can I look pretty...?”

Her brow was furrowed, but he still appeared completely calm.

After a moment, she tried to move past the awkward silence by getting into the car. She nervously looked into her compact mirror and wondered if she had ruined her plan by doing a bad job with the makeup.

Meanwhile, the duke went back around to the driver's side and got back in the car.

“Would you mind telling me what you mean?” she asked with a determined look on her face.

“If I do, will you do as I say?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I thought you didn't like making me happy.”

“It's not for you.”

“Who's it for, then?”

“Well... it's for me.” Noticing that his eyes were starting to narrow, she added, “If I look pretty, then maybe you'll do nice things for me.” She felt like she was digging herself into a deeper and deeper hole, but she wasn't going to give up.

Luckily, he didn't seem particularly suspicious. Soon he turned the ignition and started driving. Just as she was feeling relieved, he caught her off guard by saying, “So tell me, Layla.”

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me what nice things you'd like me to do for you.”

“Does that mean... that you think I'm pretty?” she asked, taken slightly aback.

Saying nothing in response, he simply smiled, which made her feel even more flustered.

*This feels too easy,* she thought. *Is he on to me? If not, then...*

“Do you really think I'm pretty? Pretty enough that you want to do nice things for me?”

She had decided to cover up her anxiety by becoming even more frank with him.

He turned the car onto the road leading to the city. Feeling her intense gaze on him, he glanced over at her. She was incredibly pretty. Pretty enough that he wanted to destroy her. Pretty enough that he wanted to possess her. Pretty enough that he didn't mind if doing so meant losing his mind.

He realized that he had strayed significantly from objectivity. As beautiful as Layla was, there were other women who were equally beautiful. He was well aware of this. However, that cold, rational judgment meant nothing in the face of his wild passion. There was only one woman who walked like Layla, who smiled like Layla, who looked at him like Layla did: Layla herself. He longed to make that infuriatingly beautiful woman his, no matter what it took.

And yet she was asking him if he found her pretty enough to want to do nice things for her? Her cute yet brutal question made him snicker.

He could stand in front of a row of noblewomen dressed to the nines, with perfect hair and makeup, and hardly feel a thing. But somehow seeing Layla's clumsy makeup job was making him feel like an adolescent boy being swept away by desire for the first time.

He started to feel hot as he pictured Layla thinking of him as she picked her outfit, combed her hair, and tried her best at putting on her makeup. It occurred to him that in a sense her wish had already come true: he was already doing a nice thing for her by not giving in to his urge to rip off her clothes, grab her hair, and start sucking that lipstick off her lips.

“Since you haven't said anything, I guess I'll conclude that you do feel that way.” Feeling a little embarrassed, she looked away, blushing. However, before long, she started looking at him again out of the corner of her eye.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” he asked, gripping the steering wheel more tightly.

“I'm just surprised that you know how to drive.”

“Why is that surprising?”

“I didn't know you knew how to do anything other than ring your service bell.” Despite the sarcasm in her remark, her eyes maintained a look of innocence.

He chuckled at the discrepancy between her meek appearance and her bold attitude, and he realized anew how much he liked seeing her like that.

Worrying that her quip might risk ruining her plan, she added, “Still, I like that it's just the two of us in here.” Then she smiled, just as she had practiced. She wanted to show her prettiest smile to the man she hated more than anyone.

The city street was crowded with carriages and automobiles. As the traffic slowed to a stop, he eyed her smiling face. She didn't change her expression even after they made eye contact. For a moment she looked away bashfully, then she shifted her gaze back onto his. His Adam's apple slowly twitched. His throat had suddenly gone dry.

“Have you thought about what sort of nice things you'd like me to do for you?” he asked, looking at her solemnly.

Feeling like she was being stared at naked, she quickly lowered her head. She had plunged into this plan with the singular thought that she needed to charm and seduce him, but she hadn't given any consideration to what it would take to imitate a lovers' relationship. What exactly did lovers do? She had no idea. She wished that he would make some demand of her instead, but he showed no intention of doing so.

“Well...” Gazing at the street, where the traffic had started moving again, she desperately tried to think of a response. Eventually she said, “First of all, tonight, you can buy me a delicious dinner.” She knew it wasn't the best response she could have given, but it was all that had come to mind. “Oh, and another thing! Do you know the field on the east side of Arvis where lots of pretty flowers bloom every spring?”

“No.”

“It's your own estate, and you don't know it? It's really pretty.”

He snickered at her disappointed reaction.

“I always used to enjoy going to that field when the flowers were in bloom. I'd lie in the shade of the trees, read, eat snacks, take naps... it was wonderful.” *I did all these things with my precious Kyle, the man you beat to a pulp,* she thought. As bitter as she felt inside, she tried to make her smile even brighter as she continued. “This spring, when the flowers are in full bloom, I'd like you to go there with me. I'll show you just how pretty your estate is.” Feeling more relaxed now, she added, “Oh, and do you like ice cream?”

He knit his brow at this odd question. “Ice cream?”

“Yes. I love it. Vanilla's my favorite.” She thought back to the days when Kyle would meet her in front of the school to walk her home, and they would get ice cream on the way. She could taste the cold, sweet treat on her tongue. It was a wonderful memory of something that she could never experience again. “Once I get my next paycheck, we should go get some. My treat.” She marveled at

her talent for deception.

Meanwhile, a twisted grin appeared on his lips. “Why have you gotten so much nicer recently?” he asked, looking at her with narrowed eyes, as if he were taking aim at a bird he was hunting. “It's almost like you're putting on an act.”

“Um...” Noticing that her hands had gone white with nervousness, she hid them under her bag. Praying internally that she would succeed in deceiving him, she said, “Because I love you.” She hated saying that phrase, but she knew it was a necessary part of her plan. “If you don't like it, I can go back to hating you, though.” Worried that he would grow suspicious again, she smiled brightly at him. She could feel her heart pounding uneasily. “But I want to love you,” she whispered.

The look of suspicion then left his eyes. The warm afternoon sunlight shone on his grinning face.

*That arrogant devil has no idea that he's stepping into my trap,* she thought. She smiled back at him, thinking, *Make the smile pretty for him, Layla. Even though you hate him... no, because you hate him... make it pretty.*

# Chapter 101:
## We Can Run Away Together

Normally, as soon as his head hit the pillow, Bill fell asleep and didn't wake up until morning. This time, however, he was awoken in the middle of the night by a nightmare. He had dreamt that he had lost Layla. He felt so disturbed by the bad dream, he didn't want to think about it.

“What's a horrible dream like that doing in my head?” he grumbled, sitting up in bed.

As he stared angrily into the darkness, he cast an even darker shadow on the floor.

He lay down again, hoping to get back to sleep, but immediately his head started swimming with unpleasant memories of the nightmare.

He didn't understand where the bad thoughts were coming from. He and Layla were going to live a happy life in the capital, where she was going to go to college, thanks to the support of the House of Herhardt. Of course, he was a little concerned about the fact that she and Kyle would be attending the same university. However, whether the two of them ended up getting back together or not, he was ready to accept her decision. With nothing but good things on the horizon for her, why had he had a bad dream about her?

Feeling very angry at the nightmare, he sat up in bed. He felt ready to pour a basin of ice water over his head, if it would clear his minds of these thoughts. Throwing off the covers, he headed to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Before he could turn on the faucet, however, he froze at the sight of something he saw through the window.

There was a slender young woman dressed in white walking towards the cottage on the forest path. Having just had a nightmare, he wondered if he was seeing things. Just as he was beginning to worry if there was something wrong with his brain, he

recognized the woman.

“Layla...?”

The woman walking through the dark forest like a ghost was unmistakably Layla. However, she looked extremely tired. Her face bore the expression of a sad, tired old woman. What was going on with her?

He felt like running outside to see if it was really her, then he changed his mind and hurried back to bed. Shortly thereafter he heard the front door open, followed by the sound of careful, quiet steps. Not wanting to believe that it was her, he stayed in bed.

*It was just a ghost,* he told himself, practically wishing that it was true. *It wasn't her, it was just a ghost.*

* * *

As if his wish had been granted, the Layla he saw at breakfast that morning looked like her usual self. Having already gotten ready for work, she was busy preparing the food. Once everything was on the table, she sat down across from him, smiling. She looked brighter and livelier than an early-spring morning.

“Is something on your mind, Uncle Bill?” she asked, noticing the unusual look on his face.

“Huh? N-no,” he stammered, waving his hands in the air. “Why would I have something on my mind? Nope, I sure don't...”

“Okay...” she replied, tilting her head as she served him some eggs and a piece of bread. His obstinate denial made her feel even more certain that something was wrong. “You really look like you have something to say. Did something happen?”

He shook his head adamantly. “What are you talking about?! Nothing happened.”

“Are you feeling well...?”

“Stop treating me like an old geezer. I'm still as strong and healthy as I ever was. I could lift you over my head right now. Want me to show you?”

“No, no, you don't have to do that,” she replied, giggling. “I'm

glad to hear you're feeling well, though."

The sight of her smiling face was so lovely, he felt a tinge of pain in his otherwise calm heart. It was only after he had adopted the young Layla that he had come to realize that deep love always included a certain amount of sadness.

"You should eat up, or soon you'll be as skinny as a rail again," he said, spreading butter thickly on a piece of bread and holding it out to her.

As always, she took the food he was offering her with a gentle smile and obediently took a bite of it. Somehow, seeing her do this made him want to cry.

*I really am getting old,* he wistfully thought. He had already been getting on in years when she had shown up at his cottage as a little girl. Now she was all grown up.

He tucked into his breakfast, and by the time he had cleared his plate, his feelings of weakness had passed. He knew that he had to stay hearty and healthy for Layla's sake. He needed to be around to see her grow wings and fly off to success, and to stop any bad guys from snatching her away. One day she was going to give birth to babies that looked just like her. He could only imagine how cute those grandchildren would be...

Suddenly he realized that he had grown very sentimental. He shook his head once again to clear his mind both of the sentimentality and of the lingering bad feelings from the nightmare.

After breakfast, instead of going out early to the garden like usual, he waited around so that he could see Layla off. She seemed moved by this simple gesture. As she left, she kept looking over her shoulder and waving. "I'll see you after work!" she shouted from amid the fresh smell of the early-spring plants.

He watched for a long time as she got on her bicycle and rode off into the distance. *When we move to Ratse, I should buy her a new bike,* he thought. Just then, he felt another pang in his heart. He ran his hands over his face, then walked over to the wheelbarrow and started loading it up with tools. *I'm turning into a crybaby in my old*

*age,* he thought.

* * *

"Do you really have to throw it away like that?" Riette asked. "You loved that thing."

Claudine glanced up at him with a look that showed she had no intention of changing her mind. She then casually tossed the bracelet she was holding into the fire that was blazing in the fireplace. The torn-up letter followed close behind.

"As far as I'm concerned, anything that she has touched is defiled," she said.

Riette doubted his ears for a moment. He couldn't believe that she was talking about her fiancé's mistress in the casual tone of voice one would use to comment on the weather.

Putting his hand to his aching forehead, he stood up and walked towards the fireplace. Claudine watched as the fire devoured the items that had been tainted by Layla's touch.

When Claudine's maid had brought in a small package for her, Riette had paid it little mind. Claudine was the most envied lady in Karlsbar's high society, and she was constantly receiving letters and gifts from ladies who wanted to curry favor with her. He was taken aback, however, when he had learned that the package was from Layla Llewellyn. Especially once he saw what was inside.

The broken bracelet that Claudine had dropped on the ground in the garden had been repaired. It looked good as new. Apparently Layla had paid for this out of her own pocket. She had also included a letter, in which she had apologized, and had confirmed that her relationship with Matthias was exactly as Claudine had guessed it to be.

Riette had already assumed this to be the case, so it hadn't surprised him. Instead, what had shocked him was the reaction of Claudine, his beloved cousin.

She had proceeded to tell him with casual indifference about all the things she had done to Layla—how she had gotten Kyle Ettman

to confront her about her relationship with the duke, and how when that didn't work, she had met with her herself and acted cruelly towards her in order to scare her from doing anything more. These cold, underhanded tricks seemed unbefitting of the dignified Claudine he knew.

“Isn't this something that you could talk over with Matthias?” he asked.

“Duke Herhardt doesn't know about it. And he must never find out about it.” She sauntered back to where she had been sitting and sat down again. “Do you think that's cowardly of me?” she asked, grinning at Riette. “Sure, rather than messing with my unassailable fiancé, I'm focusing my efforts on his mistress. Is that just? Maybe not. But so what? Picking on a lowly opponent may be cowardly, but it's not especially unfair, is it?”

“What?” he asked.

“Once Layla is gone, everything else will go back to the way it was. There's no need to confront Duke Herhardt and risk causing bigger problems.”

“If Layla goes away, do you really expect that the powerful Duke Herhardt won't be able to find her again?” he asked, sighing.

In the letter Layla had sent to Claudine, she had said that she would be leaving Matthias before the day of the wedding, and had begged Claudine to keep it a secret from him until then. She had said she was sorry for the unpardonable wrongs she had committed, and that even though she knew she could never make up for it, she was disappearing from their lives as a way of seeking atonement.

To Riette's surprise, the letter made it seem like Layla wasn't going to miss Matthias at all. Rather, she seemed desperate to get away from him by whatever means necessary. He knew, however, that if the affair had begun out of Matthias's lust and obsession, then Layla wouldn't be able to end it simply by leaving.

“After he and I get married,” Claudine said, “all I have to do is bear him a son who will be his heir. Other than that, I don't particularly want much to do with him.”

“Is that all the meaning that there is to your life? Just to become duchess and give birth to the next Duke Herhardt? Once you've completed that task, is your life over?”

“It's not the only meaning... I'd say it's probably about half. But I never want to witness Duke Herhardt enamored with that lowly girl again.” Her eyes slowly narrowed. “I'd rather that she die. If she vanished from this world forever, my fiancé would never again be reduced to the vulgar, disgusting man he becomes in her presence. He would be a perfect gentleman for the rest of his life—just what I want.”

“Claudine!”

“I'm serious, Riette. Every day, I kill that girl in my mind. I realize that the whole thing is Matthias's fault, not hers, but what can I do? He has to become my husband. It would be dreadfully inconvenient if he were to die on me,” she said, sneering.

Riette's eyes sunk with concern as he watched her. Duke Herhardt was the key to Claudine living the life she had always wanted for herself, so he couldn't step between them. However, he could plainly see that she was no longer acting like herself.

He felt indignant. *Why does he get you instead of me? Why does that man who makes you act like someone else, who doesn't even love you, get to have you?* He stood up. “As prestigious as the title of duchess may be, it's not worth destroying yourself for, Claudine.” He started slowly walking towards her. “You should break off your engagement.”

“What...?” she replied, taken aback.

“Don't sell your soul for the promise of honor,” he said, getting down on one knee in front of her.

She looked closely at his face to try to tell if he was joking, but he looked dead serious.

He had told her that she should leave Matthias and marry him countless times before, but had always acted like it was no more than a joke. Thus she had always laughed it off. It was an unwritten rule between the two of them that he would only ever make such

pronouncements in jest. But now he was blatantly breaking the rule.

“If I break off my engagement with the duke, do you really think that you and I could just get married instead?” she asked derisively.

However, his will remained firm. “Nothing's impossible, Claudine.”

“Get a grip, Marquess Lindman. Think of what people will say! 'Lady Claudine Brandt tried out one of her cousins before changing her mind and marrying the other.' 'Marquess Lindman betrayed his best friend by stealing his fiancée.' Don't you see? Our reputations would be dragged through the mud, when it's Matthias and Layla who are the disgraceful ones!”

He let out a long sigh and took her by the hand. “I don't care.”

“My family would never accept it,” she said. “Neither would yours.”

“I know.”

“If we chose to be together, we would be all but banished from the world. Do you really love me enough for it to be worth that?” Thick tears started to fall from her bloodshot eyes.

A faint grin appeared on his lips as he nodded. “Yes, I do.” He gently squeezed her hands. “I love you, Claudine. So please, marry me, and we can run away together.”

# Chapter 102:
## A Completely Different Direction

Starting early in the morning, the servants were busy packing up Katharina and Elise von Herhardt's luggage.

Every year in early spring, the empire's most prominent noblewomen gathered in the capital to participate in the empress's birthday celebrations. It was the unofficial start of the social season, so all families that were invited took great pains to prepare for the festivities.

Hessen quietly approached Dowager and Lady Herhardt and said, “The carriage is ready for departure.”

Smiling elegantly, the two former duchesses rose from their seats and started walking. Their maids followed quietly behind. Meeting them at the top of the grand staircase that led to the mansion's main hall, Matthias escorted his grandmother down the stairs.

“It would have been nice if you could have departed with us,” Katharina said, looking at her grandson.

Due to his packed schedule, Matthias wasn't going to be able to make it to the capital until the day of the birthday party.

“I know you're busy, but you mustn't let business take up all your time and energy. Your social life matters, too. You know better than anyone how important it is for the head of the household to show his face at social events whenever possible,” she said in a slightly worried tone.

While it was true that the world was changing and aristocrats increasingly had to rely on business to make their living, this only made one's position and reputation in social circles all the more important. While capitalists without aristocratic titles were mingling more and more with aristocrats, this had actually made the invisible wall between the two groups even higher and stronger.

“Yes, Grandmother,” Matthias replied, smiling politely.

While Elise and Katharina were relieved to see him acting like his

usual self, some uneasiness remained in their eyes as they exchanged glances.

“See you in Ratse, Matthias,” Elise said, hugging her son briefly before climbing into the carriage.

Matthias maintained perfect decorum as he saw them off.

“Mr. Stauf will be coming to Arvis this afternoon, Your Grace,” Hessen quietly told Matthias as he followed him back into the main hall.

Matthias nodded to show that he was listening.

The Stauf family had managed the House of Herhardt's internal legal issues for generations.

“Mr. Stauf also said that if you would like more detailed advice about the matter, you may want to bring the company's legal counsel into the discussion as well.

“I'll decide about that after today's meeting.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I'll relay that to Mr. Stauf.” Hessen then walked off towards the hallway.

Matthias stopped in the middle of the large, marble-floored hall and slowly raised his head. His blue eyes looked coldly at the large chandelier, and at the Herhardt family crest imprinted on the ceiling.

Lowering his gaze, he continued walking across the hall with a more relaxed gait.

* * *

“Elise, do you really think that's what's going on?”

Elise and Katharina's eyes filled with worry as soon as the carriage had left the estate. Looking tired, Elise removed her gloves. “It's hard to believe that Matthias of all people would do that, but we mustn't forget that he's a man. On the face of it, it's hard to understand the kindness he's showing to Bill Remmer. But with Layla Llewellyn added to the picture, it all makes sense. Don't you agree?”

Katharina looked out the carriage window, neither agreeing nor

disagreeing. She had been a highly capable and influential duchess in her day, as had her daughter-in-law. She knew it wasn't worth raising a fuss over things like this.

“Why not just ask him about it after he arrives in Ratse?” she asked Elise.

“I thought about that, but I don't think it's a good idea,” Elise replied. “Matthias seemed like he was waiting for us to ask him. Surely you know what it would mean if he has made up his mind that way.”

Dowager Herhardt understood her daughter-in-law's point at once. If their surmise proved true, the situation was a thorny one.

There was clearly something going on between Matthias and the gardener's adopted daughter. They had already suspected that this was the case on the afternoon when Matthias had informed them of his unexpected decision to relocate the gardener and his daughter to Ratse. Now it was no longer a matter of merely suspecting. Matthias was being open about the relationship, while his mother and grandmother were assiduously feigning ignorance.

“If we're right about Matthias, what can we do to protect the family?” Elise asked.

“I think the best thing to do is to continue to feign ignorance, Elise,” Katharina replied, whispering even though she knew that no one was listening in on their conversation.

Matthias and Claudine's wedding was right around the corner. Ensuring that the ceremony was not marred by any incidents or scandals was of prime importance.

“Don't you think that's for the best, though? The fact that Matthias wants to send Layla Llewellyn to the capital shows that he has no intention of letting his marriage be ruined.”

“Sure, I suppose the most important thing right now is making sure that the wedding goes off without a hitch.”

Elise felt like sighing, but she stopped herself and just nodded. If it were up to her, she would question Matthias. Knowing how much time and effort both families had put into the preparations for the

wedding, she would see to it that Layla was removed from the situation before she could get in the way of the wedding. However, she knew that trying to do this would only make things worse. Thus, the best way to avoid ruining the wedding seemed to be simply to ignore Layla.

"I'm a little afraid, though," she muttered, rubbing her temples. "Matthias seems like he's trying to get caught. What if by some chance this leads to his engagement getting broken off, and then he declares his intention to, God forbid, marry Layla Llewellyn?"

Katharina, who was as proud as could be of her grandson, frowned at her daughter-in-law's words. "Do you really think our Matthias would do such a thing?"

"I'm worried precisely because it's Matthias," Elise replied. The veins in her pale hands were starting to bulge.

Matthias had been an extremely well-behaved child. He had always fulfilled his duties perfectly and had never talked back. However, Elise had never felt that her son acted this way out of obedience to her or anyone else.

He had behaved himself out of a desire to become the perfect successor to the House of Herhardt. If his desire were to shift, then he was liable to stop acting like a perfect successor at the drop of a hat. He always behaved with flawless decorum, but at the same time, he was arrogant and firm-willed. She knew he wouldn't show obedience to anyone if doing so meant going against his own desire.

"But I suppose you're right," she said, trying to suppress the ominous feeling inside her, "he probably wouldn't do such a thing. It's Matthias, after all."

* * *

After she finished grading her students' quizzes, Layla rubbed her stiff shoulders and stood up from her bedroom desk.

It was already well past nine o'clock. Earlier in the evening, Phoebe had returned to the cottage without a note. Fortunately, it seemed that the duke would not be summoning her tonight.

Letting out a long sigh of relief, she opened the door of her closet. Just then, there was a tapping sound at her window. She knew that Phoebe was inside her cage. She had checked that the door was securely locked several times.

As she was wondering if she had imagined it, she heard more tapping, louder than the first time. It definitely wasn't Phoebe. There was no way that pigeon's tiny beak could make such a loud sound. What could be causing the sound, then...?

Half in doubt, she opened the curtains. She was relieved not to see the duke there, but her suspicion only increased. If it wasn't him, who could it have been?

After gazing at the darkness outside the window for a moment, she cautiously opened it. Just as she was about to conclude that she had just been hearing things, she noticed a long shadow on the ground outside the window.

She followed the shadow with her eyes until she let out a yelp when saw its source. “Ah...!” If she hadn't quickly put her hands over her mouth, she might have screamed loudly enough to wake Uncle Bill.

“Good evening, Layla,” the duke said, chuckling quietly as he leaned languidly against the wall next to the window.

“Wh-what are you doing here, Your Grace?”

“Good question. Why do you think?”

“Go away! Right now!” She looked uneasily back and forth between the closed door of her room and the man standing outside the window. Uncle Bill was usually asleep by this hour, but that didn't bring her much relief. “Please hurry up and leave. I hate it when you-”

Before she could finish, he shut her up by putting his lips to hers. He proceeded to give her a long, slow kiss as he firmly held her face against his. She felt even more anxious as she heard him starting to laugh.

Finally letting her go, he said, “Come outside.”

Her brow slowly furrowed as she stared at his wet lips. “No!”

“Then I'll come inside.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, reaching out to grab his arm in order to stop him from walking around to the cottage's front door. “Please, just go! I can't leave home right now.”

“Why not?”

“Uncle Bill might still be awake.”

“So what?” He glanced at her face, then at the windowsill, then at her face again.

When she understood what he was getting at, she sighed in frustration.

“You want me to climb out the window? Right now? Why should I?”

“Because I want you to,” he replied, flashing a warm but arrogant smile at her.

She pulled down her sleeves and rubbed the saliva from her lips. She knew that this wild man was not going to give up. Causing a ruckus would only make things more dangerous for her.

After glaring at him, she hurriedly locked the door to her room and returned to the window. “It's not very gentlemanly of you to ask a lady to climb out a window.”

“I wouldn't expect such a reproach to come from a lady who's as good at climbing trees as you.”

“I haven't climbed trees in a long time!” With that, she deftly climbed up onto the windowsill.

He approached the window to help her down, but she didn't need any help. She nimbly climbed down in an instant.

“Seems like you haven't lost the hang of it,” he muttered, chuckling. He then closed the window and grabbed her hand.

The two of them passed through the backyard towards the forest path. Once they had gone far enough to be out of sight of the cottage, she breathed a sigh of relief.

After a moment, she realized that they weren't on the path that led to his cabin.

“Um... we're going the wrong way, aren't we?” she asked.

“This is the way,” he casually replied. He was taking her in a completely different direction.

The moonlight peeking through the branches shone on their hands as he intertwined his fingers with hers.

“I have something to show you,” he whispered. His voice was as soft and gentle as the early-spring night.

# Chapter 103:
## Defection

After standing nearby for a while, waiting for their chance, two young ladies hurried up to Claudine. “Hello, Lady Claudine,” one of them said. “We met a long time ago at a party at the Herhardt mansion. Do you remember?”

The other lady shook her head and said, “It was such a brief meeting, she probably doesn't remember us. Let's introduce ourselves. My name is-”

“Of course I remember you, Lady Escher,” Claudine said, gently cutting the young lady off.

Escher started blushing immediately.

“And I remember you as well, Lady Diane.”

The other lady, the shorter of the two, started blushing as well.

The sisters were practically jumping up and down with excitement. Their mother, a viscountess, was frowning at them from a few paces away, but this didn't stop the immature girls.

They showered Claudine with an endless stream of praise and told her how much they were looking forward to her wedding.

Claudine had already chatted with dozens of other young ladies who had said much the same things to her, but she still reacted as if they were saying the most fascinating things in the world to her. This was one of the rules of etiquette that she had learned early in life, and by now it was second nature to her. She had also learned to memorize the name of everyone she met at social events.

After chatting with Escher and Diane, she met countless more noblewomen and young ladies desperate to form an acquaintance with her.

The party proceeded in this manner. There was the usual conversation and laughter, with beautiful music playing in the background, and a lovely floral scent in the air. It was a perfect soirée.

After chatting with every other important noblewoman, Claudine concluded her rounds by exchanging pleasantries with the crown princess. After that, she went to the lounge and sat on the sofa by the window for some well-earned rest.

Countess Brandt, who had been watching her daughter from afar, walked up to her, smiling brightly. “Since the duke's mother and grandmother couldn't attend, you're the social queen of the empire tonight, Claudine.”

“Mother...” Claudine said, frowning at her mother.

Countess Brandt wasn't going to stop, however. “Hey, it's true!” she said, her eyes full of pride in her beloved daughter.

While a family's power was the husband’s domain, it fell to the lady of the house to maintain a dignified reputation commensurate with that power. No matter how high-ranking or wealthy a family was, if the lady of the house wasn't well-respected in high society, the family would never rise above a middling level of prestige.

This was how the House of Herhardt had established itself at the top of aristocratic society. While the family's long, honorable history had given it the authority to dominate the aristocracy, each generation's Duchess Herhardt had been treated like the queen of high society. No one could deny the roles these duchesses had played in maintaining the internal stability of the family.

Thinking proudly about how her own daughter was soon going to take on this mantle, Countess Brandt eventually returned to the group of noblewomen she had been mingling with. Feeling refreshed after a bit of rest, Claudine soon also returned to the party to continue fulfilling her role.

The baroness who was serving as the party's host approached her with a warm smile on her face. “It's a shame that the duke's mother couldn't attend, since she is still the official duchess, but I can't tell you how delighted I am to see you, the future duchess, in attendance.”

“They just arrived in Ratse this evening, so they were sadly unable to attend. They were so disappointed!” Claudine replied,

shaking her head.

The baroness smiled even more brightly at this response.

Claudine and Matthias's upcoming wedding would serve not only as the beginning of their marriage, but also as her coronation as Duchess Claudine von Herhardt. In preparation for that day, she was already behaving with utmost elegance and dignity.

*"No,"* she had replied to Riette on that sunny afternoon, pulling her hand away from his.

Tears had continued to fall from her eyes, but the expression on her face had remained cold and determined.

*"We couldn't survive if we left the world of high society. You know that, Riette,"* she had said, smiling bitterly.

Riette truly loved her. She knew this better than anyone. More than anything, this was why she couldn't hold his hand—she knew she couldn't stand seeing his heart break.

She had been born and raised in the lavish, ornate world of aristocratic high society. This world was her whole life, and she loved it. Riette was no different.

The two of them were like delicate flowers that needed to be carefully cultivated in a greenhouse. If they left the greenhouse of high society, would they be able to survive merely on their love for one another?

She already knew the answer to this question. As she reflected on it, the anguish she was feeling settled down deep in her heart. To hide the resentment and disillusionment she was feeling, she smiled even more brightly.

Meanwhile, she once again imagined killing Layla, so that the most perfect person in the aristocratic world, Duke Matthias von Herhardt, would return to his old ways.

* * *

Layla finally started to catch her breath after she heard Matthias firmly shut the door to the master suite. From the moment she had entered the mansion, her legs had been so shaky with nervousness,

she had almost fallen over several times. Luckily, the duke had caught her each time.

"Don't laugh," she said, glaring at the duke as he giggled like a mischievous boy. "Why are you laughing?" Her voice had started to shake.

He set her down on the sofa, then walked at a leisurely pace over to the window that looked out onto the garden. He opened the curtains and the window, and a cool breeze blew into the room.

Having gotten her bearings, she looked around the room with fear and curiosity. Every room in the mansion was large, high-ceilinged, and lavishly decorated, but this was especially the case in the duke's master suite. Looking around, she felt dizzy and overwhelmed.

When they had started down the unfamiliar path in the forest, she couldn't have imagined that he was taking her to the mansion. The reality hadn't sunken in for her until the moment they stepped into the main hall.

She couldn't believe that someone in their right mind would do such a thing. She had soon remembered that the duke was not at all in his right mind.

*"If you keep struggling like that, servants are going to come rushing in to see what the noise is about,"* he had said. *"Not that I care."*

She could tell that he was telling the truth, so she had stopped resisting and let him lead her further, fearing what would happen if she had been caught in this state by the servants.

Her memories after that were hazy. All she could remember clearly was that her whole body was trembling with anxiety, and her heart felt like it was going to explode. Fortunately, it was late at night, and the mansion was still, allowing them to reach the master suite without encountering a single servant.

This was her first time entering the mansion through the main entrance and ascending the central staircase since the summer night two years earlier when she had attended the soirée that Claudine had invited her to. The atmosphere was completely different from

that of the staff entrance in the back of the mansion that she was used to.

After fretting nervously for a while, she finally spoke. “So, what in the world is it that you wanted to show me here?”

Sitting on the windowsill, Matthias turned his head towards her. His movements were as slow as the smoke rising from his cigarette. “Are you feeling more relaxed now?”

“No. But I'd like you to show me whatever it is you have to show me as soon as possible.”

“Why?”

“Well, I don't think I'm ever going to feel relaxed around you, so you might as well show me the thing, so I can leave.”

He responded to her earnest plea by bursting into laughter. She had been wondering if her plan to seduce him had been a mistake, but it now seemed like things weren't going as badly as they might have been.

Wanting to appear less foolish, she held her head high and caught her breath. However, she had been clutching her skirt so tightly, it was now thoroughly wrinkled and looked ridiculous.

Matthias took a drag of his cigarette, then walked over to her and held out his hand. After staring at his hand for an extended moment, she hesitantly wrapped her hand around the tip of his index finger. Based on the innocent look on his face, she didn't think that he was up to any tricks.

He then gently took her hand and made her hold onto his arm. As she watched this in a daze, her brow slowly furrowed and she said, “Th-this is weird.”

“What is?”

“Holding onto your arm. It feels a little, you know...”

She quickly let go of his arm, but he wasn't going to give up that easily.

“Our naked bodies have intermingled countless times. Why are you getting so worked up over linking arms?” he asked.

“H-how can you say such a thing?”

She started blushing with embarrassment, but he didn't blink.

“If you don't want to hear me say that kind of thing, then take my arm.”

To stop him from saying anything more, she grudgingly followed his command. He then started walking.

All they were doing was walking together, but she felt unbelievably flustered, and could barely keep her balance. She felt ridiculous. Whenever the duke escorted Claudine, she was always extraordinarily elegant and dignified. The thought of imitating her seemed impossible.

“Didn't they teach you etiquette at school?” he asked, chuckling at her awkward gait.

Gillis Girls' School, which she had attended, was the most prestigious girls' school in the city. Although aristocratic girls were still educated by private tutors, wealthy middle-class families preferred elite schools like Gillis. Since the primary aim of such schools was to educate middle-class girls in all the ways of upper-class society, Matthias knew that they wouldn't have neglected etiquette.

“Yes, they did,” she coldly replied.

“So the way you're walking right now is the product of a Gillis education? Perhaps I should look into getting my family's money back from the school.”

“Fine, you got me. I was a poor student when it came to etiquette class. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“I guess your reputation as a top student was false, then?” he asked, knowing that his question would bother her.

“No! I *was* a great student! In every subject other than etiquette!”

“Then why didn't you try harder in etiquette class?”

“I didn't want to. I preferred to spend my time reading and studying topics that were much more interesting than learning how to curtsy or hold a fork properly.”

As she was saying this, he opened another door. Looking through it, she gasped. There was yet another vast, lavish room, with a huge

bed in it.

She had assumed that they had already been in his bedroom. Only now did she notice that there was no bed in the room they were currently in. It boggled her mind to think that this vast, expansive suite of rooms was all for one person.

He led her into the bedroom. She still seemed quite awkward holding his arm, though a little less awkward than before. He chuckled. If his mother and grandmother had heard her say that she preferred studying over etiquette, they would have fainted on the spot.

“How much longer is this going to take?” she asked, looking up at him. “Could you show me now? I really want to go back.” She now looked very frightened, as if she thought the room was going to swallow her up.

After stooping down to kiss her on the forehead, he whistled a short melody.

Her eyes widened at this strange behavior. “Um... Your Grace?”

Instead of saying anything in response, he just whistled again.

Just as she was starting to worry that there was something seriously wrong with his brain, she heard the sound of a bird singing, as if in response to his whistling.

At first she thought she was hearing things. Then, all of a sudden, a small bird flew towards them from the other side of the bedroom. Incredibly, it then landed softly on the duke's outstretched hand.

It was a beautiful, yellow canary.

# Chapter 104:
## Like a Queen

Layla and the canary stared at each other for a long while. As if it was imitating the way that Layla was cocking her head, the canary cocked its own head as it sang. It seemed to be in a good mood, as its song was even more clear and beautiful than normal.

“Is this your bird, Your Grace?” Layla asked, unable to believe her eyes.

The canary stopped singing and flew over to the duke to perch on his shoulder.

“Goodness,” Layla said, shaking her head.

She was amazed to see a canary being so obedient to its master, especially when its master was none other than Duke Herhardt.

“So it was true,” she said.

“What was true?”

“Once, a long time ago, Mr. Evers said that you had a small, pretty bird as a pet. I had no idea that he was being serious.

Matthias was surprised to hear that his assistant, who was normally a man of few words, had said such a thing.

Layla cautiously extended her hand towards the bird. Alarmed at the unfamiliar hand, it flew away from her across the bedroom.

“Don't tell me it's scared of me!” she exclaimed, her green eyes widening in surprise. “How can it be afraid of me when it likes you so much?”

Matthias chuckled.

Seeming a little more relaxed now, Layla walked towards the window where the canary was perched. The bird reacted by letting her get close, then quickly flying just out of her reach, and repeating this a few times.

Matthias watched his bird flitting about like this with a languid smile on his face. The canary finally brought this game of hide-and-seek to an end by returning to its cage. Layla lingered near the cage

for a moment with her hands behind her back, then gave up and walked away back over towards the duke.

“Canaries aren't known to be very obedient. How did you manage to tame it?” she asked, looking sincerely interested.

“I clipped its wings,” he flatly replied.

She flinched at this response, then lowered her head, saying nothing.

Meanwhile, he went over to the ornate birdcage and locked its door. Sitting on its perch, the canary preened itself for a moment, then hopped into its nest and settled down. The duke was looking at the bird with a sweet, gentle gaze, as if he were looking at his lover.

Layla knew that look well. Occasionally he looked at her like that. It always made her feel extremely anxious and confused, and when this confusion finally passed, it always left a deep scar in its place.

He had tamed the bird by clipping its wings and locking it in a cage. This was the duke's method for gaining possession of something he wanted.

Sensing that her feelings were written all over her face, Layla hurried over to the window to hide her face. Looking out the window, she saw the huge, green garden stretched out below.

*If I had a window that let me look down over a vast expanse of land that I owned, would I end up like him?* she wondered, taking a step closer to the window.

Viewed from above like this, the garden that Uncle Bill had so carefully cultivated looked strange and unfamiliar.

It wasn't accurate to say that the duke had stopped her marriage to Kyle from happening. She had known from the start that she and Kyle weren't a good match. Even if the duke had made better choices and not tried to interfere, the engagement may well have been broken off anyway. And yet, this made her even less able to forgive the duke.

He had treated her like an object that he was determined to get his hands on no matter what it took. He had abused her and had

ruined her life, and yet had felt no need to feel guilty about it. He hadn't even felt the need to tell her the truth about his feelings for her. He saw her as too trivial and easy a person for that.

But to herself, her life was very precious. She took a deep breath to stop herself from crying. Even though the world saw her as a poor, lonely orphan, she loved her life. She was striving to live a good life, without shame.

She wanted to be able to make a living for herself while relying on her own strength and intelligence. And at some point, if she met someone and fell in love, she wanted to build a happy, healthy family together. She would switch out the curtains in their home with the changing seasons, she would make delicious, hearty meals, and she would measure their children's height on the kitchen doorframe.

As she looked down on the dark garden, she vividly remembered how ardently she had once pursued that life. She had remained persistent in the face of all obstacles. She had laughed in the face of all setbacks. She had deeply cherished that vague hope, not realizing that it would all be thrown away because of one man's lust.

Soon, the duke walked up behind her and whispered, “Layla.”

She reflexively started smiling and looked at his reflection in the window. He looked at her reflection as well. The girl who had cherished that beautiful dream was gone, replaced by the duke's mistress, a woman who shamefully had to smile at the man she hated.

Claudine had been right. What was the point of trying to resist the duke? Despite all of Layla's desperate attempts to preserve her dignity, in the end she was nothing more than a woman who had stolen another woman's man.

She laughed bitterly. Just then, the duke stooped over and kissed her neck. When she flinched out of reflexive fear, he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist.

*He's done this many times before, so why is it making me feel so sad*

*this time?* she wondered, shutting her eyes while resigning herself to his inescapable embrace. *What's the point of trying to get revenge? I just want to run away as soon as possible. Far, far away. Far enough that I'll never have to see him again.*

* * *

"Layla."

*How much time has passed?* she wondered. The endless stream of thoughts flowing through her head had been broken by the sound of him calling her name in a sweet, enticing tone.

*Don't lose strength,* she told herself. She opened her eyes and saw his smiling face. When she realized that she was lying in bed, she started blushing immediately.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked.

He responded to her question by gently biting her peach-colored cheek. She yelped at the unexpected pinch.

He proceeded to bite her other cheek, the cute tip of her nose, and her small, thick lips. She struggled to get away from him, but this only made him more mischievous.

He wanted to destroy her so that he could possess her. At the same time, he wanted to cherish and protect her. These contradictory desires both grew in intensity simultaneously.

"S-stop! It hurts!" she shouted as he started to gnaw at the spot on her neck where her racing heartbeat could be felt.

She clutched his shoulders firmly.

He could have easily shaken off her weak grip, but instead he obediently stopped biting at her.

She looked at him in surprise. Her lips quivered like the rose petals in a breeze. She started to throb down below. An empty laugh escaped her lips, but she didn't mind.

Snapping out of her daze, she forcefully pushed him away. Making no resistance, he allowed himself to be pushed.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled over and lay on his back

with her on top of him. In an instant, she found herself looking down at his face.

“Shouldn't I be asking you that?” he asked. “You're the one who just pushed me.”

“Did I push you too hard?” she asked.

He laughed mischievously as he looked at her. His deep-blue eyes no longer frightened her.

“I guess you've gotten weaker,” she teased, furrowing her brow and pressing down on his shoulder. “I guess if I do this, you won't be able to move, huh?”

“Maybe not.”

“Then you'd better stop smiling.” She pulled his arms from around her waist and pinned them down on the bed. “Aren't you afraid, Your Grace?”

Still not resisting her, he gazed submissively up at her face. Emboldened by this, she started to caress his well-defined chin.

“Aren't you afraid of what I might do to you?”

She lifted his chin, just like he had done to her so many times. His languid eyes were still smiling.

“Do anything you want,” he softly replied.

Even while he was pinned underneath her, with his face held firmly in her grip, he still seemed relaxed and in charge. He gazed at her with frank, undisguised lust.

A twisted grin appeared on his lips. “And I mean *anything.”*

Forgetting all her hesitation and anger, she stared at his handsome face, transfixed. Without realizing it, she had let go of his chin and was now gently tracing the contours of his face with her fingertips.

“Do you like what you see?” he asked, still not moving an inch.

“Yes,” she replied, trying to remain as calm as he was.

His brow furrowed slightly at her unexpected response.

“I like your looks much more than your personality,” she added. It wasn't a difficult lie to tell. In fact, there was some truth to it.

Suddenly he burst into loud laughter. She could feel his body

convulsing with each chuckle.

“Are you going to be all right, Layla?” he asked, placing his hands on top of hers, which were on his cheeks.

His hands felt hot against hers.

“Aren't you worried about me going wild right now?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, innocently giggling as she shook her head and tried to hide her disgust.

She looked around the room, taking in the high ceiling and ornately decorated walls, the antique furniture and expensive pieces of art, before shifting her gaze back to his face. The owner of all this was lying helplessly beneath her. This brought her a deep feeling of relief. He wasn't frightening anymore. Instead, he seemed like just an ordinary man.

“Since you can't move, aren't you the one who should be worrying right now?” she asked.

“Are you confident that you can do something impressive enough for me to worry about it?”

“I think so,” she replied, smiling sincerely.

Even in that moment, she continued staring at him. She didn't want to look away for even an instant. She wanted him to remember this moment forever.

She was determined to give him an impressive amount of pain and suffering. As if to communicate this promise to him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and stuck her tongue into his mouth. She could feel his breathing growing unsteady as she continued.

It was then that she realized that although he was sometimes frightening to her, she deeply enjoyed seeing this most lofty and dignified of men reduced to a wild, helpless slave of his own lust for her.

When he started to writhe underneath her and grab her hips, she gently reprimanded him, saying, “Wait. You said that I can do anything I want.”

She placed his arms back down on the bed, then she started

unbuttoning her blouse. She was acting like an experienced temptress, but her face was blushing. In fact, her whole body had gone red. Standing with a dignified posture, she started removing her clothing, gradually revealing more and more of her body. Her smooth shoulders and breasts, her back and crotch were spotted with dark marks that he had left on her.

He looked up at her, immersed in a sweet sense of defeat. He had to exert a considerable amount of effort not to pounce on her. He wasn't sure why he was going along with this silly game she was playing, but he didn't want to stop.

Once she was completely nude, she took a deep breath to steel her nerves, then she got back on top of him. Looking down at him, she slowly started grinning. She looked stunningly beautiful, like a queen who had conquered his life.

# Chapter 105:
## The Last Waltz

Deciding that he would accept Layla as the queen of his life, Matthias let a hollow laugh escape his lips. Meanwhile, Layla, who had been looking fretfully down at him, cautiously lowered her body towards him. When he felt the sensation of her breasts touching his chest, he let out a moan. His moan was cut short, however, when she pressed her lips against his.

She started kissing him repeatedly, as if she were his little bird pecking away at its feed. He watched this awkward onslaught of kisses pensively, gripping the sheets so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

He knew that she was up to something. He had been sure of it since the moment she had started undressing him. For the most part she appeared to be in a passionate stupor, but now and then her hands stopped moving momentarily and a frightened, overwhelmed look flashed across her face.

He found it cute the way she was desperately trying to seduce him.

He knew there was no way that she had fallen in love with him overnight. As much as he wanted to believe that she had, he knew it made no rational sense. Perhaps she wanted something from him. He knew that there was no other reason why she would be with him, but he didn't care.

If she wanted something, he would give it to her. Whatever her goal was in this moment, he was just happy that she was with him. As far as he was concerned, anything she might demand from him would cause him no harm, as long as she would be his in exchange.

After she managed to remove his shirt, she paused for a moment, panting. Her whole body was flushed red. There was a determined look in her eyes, but her sweaty hands were trembling.

He let go of the wrinkled sheets and passionately clutched at his

own neatly combed hair. Her eyes shot open at the sound of his rough breathing and moans. She couldn't believe that these sounds were coming out of the duke, but he was still looking straight into her eyes.

After feeling embarrassed for a moment, she grabbed his shoulders, as if to reprimand him. He furrowed his brow slightly, but made no attempt to resist her. Letting go of his hair, he simply stared at her, as if waiting for her to do what she wished with him. Still feeling uneasy, she grabbed tightly onto his wrists. He snickered, but remained passive, which brought her some relief.

However, her relief was short-lived. As if she had suddenly awoken from a dream, she looked around herself in a daze. She saw the incredibly large, lavishly decorated bedroom, the canary fast asleep inside its beautiful cage, and the man lying beneath her. As her gaze shifted to her hands wrapped around his wrists, her self-confidence vanished.

She felt ridiculous for having briefly misunderstood who was the dominant one in this relationship. If he wanted to, the duke could overpower her with one hand tied behind his back. She wasn't seducing him; he was just humoring her. This realization brought feelings of shame rushing back to her.

“Please continue, Your Majesty,” he said with a twisted, enchanting smile on his face.

*What have I done?* she thought, feeling humiliated. *I thought I was manipulating him, but it was the other way around...*

She quickly lowered her eyes, not wanting him to see that they were welling up with tears. This made her even more vividly aware of the fact that she was sitting on top of a naked man. Flustered by this, she raised her head, and saw his face.

No longer confident enough to make eye contact with him, she tried to twist her body around, but he stopped her by grabbing her waist and making her keep facing him. Almost losing her balance, she just barely managed to catch herself by clutching his shoulders.

“I w-want to s-stop,” she said. It was the earnest truth. She

suddenly felt very frightened. She had thought that everything was going according to plan, but now she realized that the duke had never really relinquished control of the situation. Now, it felt like the only viable path for her was to run away from him as soon as possible.

Before her frantic thoughts could reach their conclusion, they were cut short by a strong physical sensation.

“Ah!”

It was the hot, indecent sensation of the duke sucking on her breasts as if he were about to swallow them whole.

She struggled to get away from him, but the duke was done playing nice. She was soon overwhelmed by cries and moans that she didn't want to believe she was making, and by the wet sound of her breasts being sucked on. Matthias then forcefully untied the ribbon that was loosely holding up her hair. As her hair dropped down and brushed against his skin, his breathing suddenly grew more ferocious.

After leaving red marks all over her breasts, he finally let her go. Her arms gave way and she collapsed on top of him, panting.

“You want to stop *now*? That won't do,” he said. Holding her against his chest, he rolled over on top of her.

In an instant, she found herself pinned underneath him. The shadow of his muscular frame loomed over her.

“If you make a promise, you have to keep it. Don't you think so?” he whispered in her ear.

She opened her eyes at the languid sound of his voice.

“You're my queen, after all,” he added, smiling as he looked into her eyes.

This gentle tease made her eyes well up even more. However, before she could deliver a retort, he had already entered her and started thrusting vigorously.

* * *

The Ratse party celebrating the arrival of spring grew more and

more lively as the night went on. After growing tired of dancing, sipping champagne, and exchanging small talk with the other partygoers, Claudine quietly retreated to the lounge.

A flower-scented breeze was wafting in through the open window. Spring came earlier in Ratse than in Karlsbar, and the flowers were already in bloom. She realized that summer was now just around the corner. This made her feel both relief and sorrow at once.

“I certainly hope this party's queen isn’t already leaving.”

She turned around at the sound of the familiar voice and saw Riette. She wasn't trying to avoid him. It would have been silly to let things get awkward between them at this point in their relationship.

“No, I'm just taking a quick break,” she replied.

“Ah, I see, Duchess Herhardt,” he said, snickering.

She frowned, which seemed to be the reaction he was aiming for. Smiling with satisfaction, he asked, “Why are you upset?”

“Riette...”

“Haven't you been eagerly looking forward to the day when you can be called 'duchess'?”

“Sure, of course I have. And if teasing me by calling me 'duchess' early helps soothe your wounded heart, then by all means, go ahead,” she said with a coy look on her face.

He stared at her for a moment, then let out a dry chuckle. *Is my heart wounded? I suppose it is,* he thought, realizing that he had been expecting her to agree to run away with him. This expectation felt very naive to him now. *Do I hate her, then?* As he asked himself this, he chuckled again.

He wished that he were capable of hating her. He had wished that ever since he had first fallen in love with her, knowing that she was being raised to become Duke Herhardt's fiancée. However, it was no use. Even though she was selfish and greedy, he couldn't bring himself to hate that poor, arrogant lady.

“I must say, it's an honor to know that the queen of high society

is worried about my wounded heart," he said, laughing as he walked towards the sofa on which she was sitting. "However, it's not a wound that can be healed by a few biting remarks. You should know that, being the one who wounded it."

"Please keep proper boundaries, Marquess Lindman. For the sake of propriety."

"Of course I will." He casually held his hand out towards her. "All I ask from you is one dance, my lady." His smile was as gentle as the early-spring breeze.

Taken aback, she snickered, but couldn't take her eyes off his hand.

When she had made her debut in high society, her first dance partner had naturally been Matthias. However, when she thought back to that night, what stood out in her memory was the last waltz, which she had danced with Riette.

Riette's dancing technique wasn't flawless like Matthias's, but she could feel how much he cared about her. Even if he hadn't had the same elegant, polite demeanor as Matthias, his playful, mischievous attitude had felt much warmer to her. She could tell that he was truly happy for her. Strangely, even though she was treated like a princess by Duke Herhardt, who was the most sought-after potential husband in the empire, it was Riette's warmth that soothed her aching heart.

Just like she had that night, she took his hand, agreeing to his dance request. He was right—one dance together wouldn't cross the line into impropriety. This was confirmed by the fact that, when they re-entered the hall, no one gave them any strange looks. It was an ordinary party.

As they danced, Riette behaved with uncharacteristic courtesy, like a gentleman dancing a formal waltz with a lady he had just met. That is to say, like a friendly stranger.

"Thank you for granting me the honor of this dance, Lady Claudine," he said, bowing to her as the waltz came to an end. "Or should I say, Duchess Herhardt?" After completing his bow, he

smiled at her, gazing into her eyes.

He was keeping proper boundaries, just like she wanted.

* * *

*It all turned out well,* Claudine thought with relief. She had felt this way throughout the party and had continued feeling this way as she returned to the Brandt family's Ratse mansion. She truly believed that all had turned out well. Until she was finally alone in her bedroom and could drop her facade, that is.

After tossing and turning but not being able to fall asleep, she sat up in bed and turned on the bedside lamp. Even under the lamp's warm light, her face looked ashen.

She couldn't stop thinking about the way Riette had smiled at her after their dance. She wondered if his unrequited love for her was finally coming to an end. Although he wasn't yet engaged, he didn't seem likely to sit back and wait for too much longer. She expected that he would fulfill his duty to find a suitable marchioness and marry her within the year. Thus, it would be best for both of them if tonight's party was their farewell to each other. She understood this. At least, it made sense to her in theory.

She got out of bed and walked over to the bedroom door. However, she couldn't bring herself to open it. The thought that she might have lost Riette forever caused the cold anger inside her to grow even more intense.

She had every intention of becoming duchess, and yet she despised the thought of having to endure a marriage in which she got the short end of the stick. If the marriage was analogous to a business deal, it needed to be fair.

Suppressing her emotions, she got out some stationery and a quill and sat down at the table. As she took a few slow, deep breaths, her eyes grew calmer.

For the sake of her marriage to Matthias von Herhardt, she had lost her love. Thus it was only right that he should have to experience the same thing. If the duke were to get both marriage

and love, that would be an unfair arrangement.

*“As prestigious as the title of duchess may be, it's not worth destroying yourself for, Claudine.”*

She felt like she could still hear Riette whispering that in her ear. After hesitating for a moment, she dipped the quill in the inkwell, then put it to the paper. It had already been a long time since her heart had been eaten away by her desire for honor and prestige.

It wasn't that she doubted that Layla would keep her promise to leave Matthias. There was no way Layla would want to endure the humiliation of staying with Matthias after all that Claudine had told her. If that were all there were to it, she wouldn't dislike Layla so much.

But she didn't feel like waiting for Layla to make up her mind and leave. She was going to get rid of her sooner than that. She couldn't actually kill Layla, but she knew a way to torment her enough that she would want to die. And this would likely result in her departing from Arvis as fast as she could.

Confident in her plan, she started writing a letter to that foolish, old gardener.

# Chapter 106:
## You're Still Mine

Each time Layla opened her tear-filled eyes, she saw the duke's blue eyes looking down at her. He stared intently at her with a calm, cool gaze, even as his hips were thrusting forcefully. She could feel his passion. It was overwhelming for her.

She tried pushing him away, until she realized that this was no use. Then she covered her face with her hands. Even with her face covered, however, she could feel his gaze. As much as she wanted to stay silent, she couldn't stop herself from moaning. Gradually the moans grew in intensity.

"Layla..." he whispered.

The throbbing sensation she felt each time he thrust into her no longer felt painful. As she realized this, she lowered her hands from her face and looked at him. Her vision was hazy because of the tears in her eyes. Viewed in this way, he looked very handsome.

As he stared back at her, he let out a passionate sigh. There was a hint of a smile on his lips. Unable to endure the strange sensation this gave her, she curled up her body, as if trying to disappear.

He furrowed his brow slightly and chuckled. Just like her moans, his laughter sounded passionate but dry. Slowing down his thrusting slightly, he lowered his head to kiss her. As she felt his lips and tongue exploring her mouth and chin, she realized the miserable situation she was in. The wet pounding sound coming from between her legs suddenly grew louder.

She tried pulling her face away from his. When that proved useless, she put her hand over her mouth to block it from him, and desperately tried to close her legs. In response, he took hold of her knees and spread her legs open even wider. Startled, she struggled frantically, but he remained calm. He placed her slender ankles on top of his firm shoulders and continued thrusting. Even as she felt like she couldn't take any more, he continued to plow into her, as if

he were trying to destroy her.

“Don't look at me! I don't like it!” she shouted, extending her arms towards his face and trying to cover his eyes. All that this brought, however, was a derisive chuckle from the duke.

She firmly bit her lip to stop herself from sobbing. She had known from the start that being reduced to a mistress was shameful and miserable, but in this moment she was experiencing a new flavor of sadness that she had never felt before. It wasn't a feeling that he was making her feel; it was a chaotic emotion that was arising from deep within her.

And yet, what made this sadness truly unbearable for her was the fact that she could still hear herself moaning with pleasure. Meanwhile, he started lapping up her tears and saliva, like a kitten drinking milk from a saucer.

“S-stop. Th-this is really-”

“You're pretty,” he whispered, cutting her off.

She felt dirty and ashamed. She wanted to tell him off, but she couldn't find the words.

“You're so pretty, it's driving me wild,” he whispered even more quietly, smiling.

Still unable to say anything, she stared at him and thought about how he had unrepentantly walked all over her just so that he could fulfill his lust, how he had used underhanded tricks to force her to become his mistress, how he had ruined her life, was still ruining her life, and seemed to intend to continue ruining her life forever.

And yet, she was still feeling pleasure. Why was this...?

She thought of the humiliation and guilt she had felt in front of Claudine, and the pain that she had caused Kyle. She thought of the heartache that she felt whenever Uncle Bill came to her mind, and the deep fear that he would find out about everything.

The duke was the source of all of this. She knew this all too well, and yet, she couldn't connect the man she knew he was with the person she was staring at. His unwavering gaze as he looked back at her seemed sincerely caring, as did the sound of his voice

whispering in her ear, the sound of his laughter, everything...

Disturbed by these thoughts, she tried to wipe them from her mind by focusing on the pleasure he was giving her. She felt like she was floating. She sniffled and moaned and struggled to breathe.

Meanwhile, he continued kissing her face, wet as it was with sweat and tears, while whispering over and over, “You're pretty... You're so pretty...”

* * *

As he slowly ran his fingers up and down her spine, she gradually calmed down. As he listened to her breathing become gentler and more regular, a contented smile spread across his face.

When he started kissing her still-red cheeks, she slowly opened her eyes. His face filled her blurry vision. After blinking a few times to regain her focus, she made eye contact with him.

Suddenly feeling a new sort of embarrassment, she flinched and tried to look away, but he grabbed her face and made her keep looking at him.

Without any particular reason in mind, he tried saying her name. “Layla...” The name felt sweet on his tongue as he said it. “Layla...” As if he were teasing her, he whispered it several more times. “Layla... Layla Llewellyn... My Layla...”

Soon he felt silly needlessly repeating her name like this. He chuckled but couldn't stop himself from continuing. All of a sudden he impulsively wrapped his arms around her and pressed his body against hers. He found the stiff, frightened expression on her face both irritating and endearing.

“I c-can't keep going,” she said, weakly grasping at his shoulders. Her voice was trembling. “I really can't. Please.”

Only then did he realize what she was frightened of. Even as he chuckled at this realization, his hand continued caressing her hair, as if he were trying to comfort and console her. Gradually she let down her guard and let go of his shoulders.

Grasping her hands, he whispered, “Tell me, Layla.”

She cocked her head, much like his inquisitive bird. “Tell you what?”

“Tell me what you want. It must be something huge if you're putting this much effort into trying to seduce me for it.”

“That's not it,” she said, her eyes growing wide with shock. “I already told you. I've fallen in love with you, and I want to experience life as your lover, even if it can only be for a short time.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. What, do you think I'm lying?”

“Hard to say.” He was still smiling, but his eyes were as calm as a deep, still lake.

Having only just regained her composure, her heart started beating faster out of the uneasiness that his unreadable expression was causing her. “To tell the truth,” she finally said, “I do want something.” It was taking all her courage to maintain eye contact with him. After another long pause, she muttered, “My birthday is next month.”

He chuckled at the contrast between the resolute look on her face and the vulnerable thing she had just said. “What day next month?” he asked, realizing that he didn't even know his own mistress's birthday.

“The first Saturday,” she whispered. Her voice was filled with caution, but also with a child-like excitement.

It was just when the first buds of spring would be sprouting. It fit Layla perfectly.

“So, you want me to get you a birthday present?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, nodding.

He snickered once again at her shrewdness. “What kind of present?”

“Well... I'm still thinking about it. It's hard to pick just one thing.”

“Then tell me everything you want.”

“No, I'd rather not.”

He was amused by her anticlimactic response. Despite the bold expression on her face, she was blushing profusely. This reminded

him of the benefit performance at the end of the previous year, which had featured the pretty fairy who had been so bad at acting. Her awkwardness only made her more endearing to him.

“I'll pick one that's really meaningful to me,” she said. She was trying to act coy, but her words came out just as awkwardly as when she had had to act in that play. “Once I’ve made up my mind, I'll tell you.”

“Do you think I'm going to get it for you, just because you tell me about it?”

“Yes, I think you might...” she replied, bashfully furrowing her brow.

“Why?”

“Because... I'm pretty?” She felt unbelievably embarrassed at this silly response, but it was all she could come up with. “Y-you said so yourself, just now.”

He stared at her, making her feel even more embarrassed.

“Were you... lying?” she asked.

When he saw her eyes narrow with doubt, he couldn't help but burst into laughter. He didn't mind that she was trying to manipulate him. He was gladly allowing himself to be swept along by her charms.

He sat up in bed. She eyed him hesitantly, wondering what he was about to do. After prattling on for so long, she suddenly seemed like a novice.

Gazing up at the ceiling, he slowly caressed her hair. Without meaning to, he started imagining a life in which he fell asleep next to her every night and woke up next to her every morning. At some point he had started longing for such a life on a regular basis. Even while he was in the grip of this fantasy, however, he knew that it was impossible.

The woman he married wouldn't simply be his wife; she would be Duchess Herhardt. Even if he accepted her, the empire's aristocrats would not accept her as a duchess. She was incapable of becoming the queen of high society. Perhaps she wouldn't accept the role of

duchess, either. Thus, his fantasy was impossible. However, this knowledge did nothing to stop his desire.

He wasn't afraid of anything in the external world. He was a Herhardt, born and raised. He had never worried about what others thought of him. He had never bowed in submission to anyone. Whatever he wanted, he got. That was the life he knew as Duke Herhardt, and it would be like this for as long as he was a Herhardt.

What he feared, rather, was the desire burning inside of him, the wild desire he felt for Layla and Layla alone. This desire had pushed him to consult with his attorney about the potential financial impact of breaking off his engagement. It had pushed him to bring Layla into his bedroom in the mansion. It had to be stopped.

Taking a deep breath, he released his grip on her hair. Lying with her body curled up, she stared blankly up at him.

She could still be his, even once she no longer lived at Arvis. It would only be a superficial change to their way of life. She would be free to pursue her interests in Ratse, while he would be able to continue spending part of each year at Arvis, living as a perfect gentleman. Even when they were apart, she would still be his.

However, it was hard to imagine an Arvis without Layla. He pictured her as a young girl frolicking through the garden, the forest, the riverside, and the distant fields that comprised the estate. Then he thought back over the several years during which she had grown into the beautiful young woman she was now. Somewhere along the way, she had started to seem like a part of Arvis, just as essential to it as the garden, forest, river, and fields. She still felt that way to him.

“Ouch...” she quietly said.

Only then did he realize that he had started clutching her hair again.

“That hurts,” she said, shaking her head as she tried to push his hand away.

In response, however, he only increased the strength of his grip on her golden locks, whispering, “You're mine, Layla.” He stooped

down and kissed her furrowed brow. In contrast to his rough, unrelenting grip, his voice sounded utterly calm. “From head to toe, you're mine.”

He let go of her hair and started caressing her slender neck. There was a gentle smile on his lips, but his eyes were full of frigid passion as he gazed at her. A chill went down her spine, and she couldn't bring herself to push him away anymore.

Trying not to cry, she said, “But you're not mine.”

Narrowing his eyes at her, he nodded and coldly replied, “No, I'm not.” Before he started slowly kissing her again, he whispered, “But you're still mine.” After whispering this cruel remark, Claudine's fiancé smiled warmly.

# Chapter 107:
## Spring Flowers

One day, Bill received an envelope with no sender listed on it. Looking indifferently at the envelope, he sat down on his chair on the porch and opened it. A gentle spring breeze blew in from the forest, ruffling his silver hair. He took the letter out of the envelope and calmly started reading it. Soon, he started frowning and muttered, “What the hell is this?”

*Mr. Remmer, I'm writing to inform you of something. It wasn't easy to bring myself to write this, but I think you should know. It's about Layla Llewellyn, your beloved, adopted daughter.*

*Your precious Layla is in a relationship with a man who is engaged to another woman. I understand that this will be hard for you to believe. You'll probably think that this letter is nothing more than an attempt to slander and defame your innocent daughter. I assure you, however, that there is not a single lie in this letter. You can ask Layla yourself. I'm sure she wouldn't lie to you, Mr. Remmer.*

*Once you realize that what I'm telling you is true, I hope that you will do something about it. I have no intention of forcing you to do anything. However, if you truly love Layla, I know you won't just stand by and let her ruin her own life. Of course, that is just my opinion. The choice is yours and yours alone.*

*I regret to have to give you such unpleasant news. However, as I said, every word of this letter is true, I swear.*

*I hope that you will make the right choice.*

There was no signature at the end of the ornately handwritten letter. It seemed to be a woman's handwriting, but he had no idea who would have had the audacity to write such a slanderous letter.

As his face turned red with anger, he crumpled up the letter and

threw it to the ground. He was sure that the person who wrote it was merely trying to defame and humiliate Layla. How could someone even make up such a shameful accusation?

Panting with rage, he picked up the crumpled letter from the ground, intending to rip it up into shreds. However, his hands froze when he suddenly remembered what he had seen the other night—the ghostly apparition wandering out of the woods that had looked just like Layla.

Gulping nervously, he flattened out the letter again. His large, rough hands, which were normally firm and steady no matter what, had started to tremble. If what he had seen was really Layla...

“This is a load of nonsense,” he said, crumpling up the letter again.

He wasn't going to let a cowardly, slanderous letter make him doubt Layla. However, an ominous feeling kept returning to him, making it hard to breathe. The porch's old floorboards creaked under his weight as he paced back and forth.

Finally, he tore the letter up into tiny pieces, and then lit them on fire. Still feeling unsettled, he took the ashes and stuck them deep inside a pile of manure.

He walked back to the porch in a daze and sat down, staring at the forest path Layla had taken that morning when heading off to work. The more he tried to deny it, the clearer the image of Layla walking from the woods that night grew in his mind, haunting him.

“There's no way it's true!” he shouted, bolting up from his chair. “She's not that kind of girl!” His loud, booming voice was shaking.

* * *

“I can't believe you're making another request like this, Miss Llewellyn! And this time, it's not a transfer request, but a resignation?” the principal exclaimed, sighing as he set down his cup of tea. “Is it like last time? Do you want to leave your hometown and visit a new city? Hmm... If that's the case, then I'll once again ask that you take some time before making up your

mind."

"No," she replied, smiling bashfully as she shook her head. "It's different this time."

"What is it, then? Are you thinking of getting married?"

"Are you kidding? No!"

"Then I have no idea why you want to quit your teaching job, Miss Llewellyn." The principal leaned back into the sofa he was sitting on, frowning.

After telling the principal that she had to speak with him urgently, she had told him that she was resigning from the school. This came as a shock to the principal, especially considering that Layla was still a new teacher, had been working diligently all semester, and seemed to get along very well with her students.

"I'm going to prepare for the college entrance exam again," she said, smoothly reciting the lie that she had practiced repeatedly in front of the mirror the previous night.

"College? I see. That's right, you were originally supposed to go to Ratse University, weren't you?" the principal replied.

Layla's carefully selected reason stopped the principal from making any further attempt to persuade her to stay at the school.

The principal kindly promised to find a replacement teacher for her as quickly as possible. Smiling brightly like someone excited about the future, she expressed her thanks to the principal while also apologizing for the inconvenience she was causing him. This was also something she had practiced several times.

Still wearing that well-practiced smile, she left the principal's office. All the children had already left school for the day, so the school's hallway was strikingly silent, other than the sound of her steps as she walked down it.

The day of her departure was fast approaching. As she looked at the school grounds, which were full of signs of the arrival of spring, the smile gradually vanished from her face. The branches of the apple tree in the garden by the window were covered with flower buds. Before long, there would be spring flowers wherever one

looked.

Everything was going the way she wanted it to. The duke's obsession with her was growing more and more intense. Sometimes it seemed like he was in love with her, although she was no longer naive enough to believe that he was capable of love.

That perfect gentleman had walked right into her trap. He believed all the promises she had made, even though she had no intention of keeping them. He was looking forward to their future together. As far as he knew, everything was going perfectly for him, and would continue to do so forever. All that remained for her now was to thoroughly destroy all his hopes.

Firm in this decision, she got onto her bicycle. She decided to ignore the uneasiness simmering inside of her. She also didn't want to think about how handsome the duke's blue eyes had looked as he had gazed at her and whispered, *"You're pretty."* What more could there be between the two of them?

As she rode back towards Arvis, her bicycle's shadow passed over the wildflowers growing along the edge of the road.

* * *

Spring had sprung, and the flowers were in bloom. Matthias had already known this, but it didn't sink in for him until he took his horse out for a ride one morning. The fresh scent of the soft, young grass covering the field brought a smile to his face.

He rode straight across the field and came to a stop under a willow tree next to the stream. Both he and his stallion were feeling lively and energetic after their first long ride in a long time.

He nimbly dismounted from the horse and leaned against a large tree nearby. On the other side of the stream was a vast field covered with spring flowers. He was sure that this was the spot Layla had been talking about, the field covered with beautiful flowers that she wanted to visit with him.

He had explored Arvis on horseback regularly since he was a child, but this was his first time encountering this spot. It occurred

to him that Layla knew the estate better than he did. Perhaps Arvis itself loved her more than it loved him.

He laughed at himself as he realized that he had been gazing up at the sky, thinking such wistful thoughts. However, he didn't particularly feel like thinking about anything else. This was always the case when he thought about anything connected to Layla.

He finally left the flower-covered field as the sun was starting to set. His riding posture was as perfect as before, but he had a much more relaxed expression on his face. Spring had sprung, and the flowers were in bloom. He missed her.

* * *

“What are you saying, Layla? You're not going to accept the Herhardts' sponsorship?” Bill asked, so shocked by Layla's declaration that he almost fell out of his chair.

Layla, however, remained calmly smiling. “Yes, Uncle Bill, just as I said.”

“But, Layla...” Unsure how to finish his sentence, he gulped down his beer to try to calm his heart. He hadn't expected her to make up her mind so swiftly. Why wouldn’t she even consider such a golden opportunity?

“So, Uncle Bill, once spring has passed, let's go somewhere else instead of Ratse. Somewhere that has nothing to do with the Herhardt family.”

“It's not important to me where we go. But the Herhardts are offering to sponsor your college education. That is important. Will you give it some more thought, Layla? Your future is on the line.”

“I already have given it plenty of thought, Uncle Bill,” she replied, still smiling.

Despite her innocent appearance, Bill knew that she smiled like this when she was at her stubbornest.

“By the way, Uncle Bill, Monica got a perfect score on her arithmetic quiz today. You know Monica, right? My youngest student. You met her when I brought my class here for that autumn

field trip," she said, changing the subject and thus making it clear that she had no intention of changing her mind.

Bill was in such a daze, he could hardly process anything that she was saying.

He had felt distracted all day, ever since receiving the anonymous letter that morning.

They chatted some more, with Bill hardly retaining anything. Just as Layla was starting to clear the table, he impulsively said, "So... Layla…"

He had decided that it would be better to ask her about the allegations in the letter right out, even if it might hurt her feelings. He figured that this would be better than letting those painful, disgraceful thoughts continue to haunt his mind.

However, as soon as had started speaking, he lost his courage. "Never mind..."

Gazing into her pure, innocent eyes, he was ashamed to even consider that the allegations were true.

"I'm going to go to bed. In my old age, I've been getting tired earlier and earlier in the evening." He then hurried out of the kitchen. Of course, he had no actual intention to go to sleep.

He had had the growing feeling that something strange was going on with Layla even before he had received the letter.

He had felt this way ever since he had returned from his trip, or perhaps even a little before then. As recently as the beginning of winter, however, she had been her usual, bright, lovable self.

He lay sprawled out on his bed, lost in thought. He wished he could stop thinking about the letter, but his mind kept returning to the slanderous things it had said. Angry at himself for being unable to stop his thoughts, his face grew red.

Layla would never enter into a relationship with an engaged man, he was sure of it. And anyway, there was no such man for her to be with. What man was there among everyone at Arvis who would be bold enough to cheat on his fiancé with Layla?

*Wait…*

Bill's face froze as a thought popped into his head. It was such a ridiculous thought, he burst into laughter.

*What's wrong with my head?* he thought. *Am I drunk? All I had was one beer.*

Suddenly, he regretted destroying the letter. If he had kept it, he could have used the handwriting to figure out who wrote it, and then he could have gotten revenge on them.

How dare they drag my Layla's name through the mud like that...?

As he was starting to grit his teeth with rage, he heard the sound of Layla cautiously opening her bedroom door. He pricked up his ears to hear what happened next. He heard the cottage's old floorboards creaking, and then the sound of the front door opening and closing.

He staggered out of bed and rushed to the window where the other night he had seen the ghost that had looked just like Layla. Once again, he saw a similar sight. The ghost that he had seen walking towards the cottage the other night was now walking into the woods.

Now he was sure. It was no ghost. It was his precious Layla.

# Chapter 108:
## Easy, Ever So Easy

Layla showed up early at the duke's dark, quiet cabin. She retrieved the key from the pocket of her cardigan and opened the door. As always, she left the lights off. By now, she was so familiar with the interior of the cabin, she had no problem getting around in the darkness. She would likely still remember the floorplan long after departing from Arvis.

She calmly surveyed the drawing room. It reminded her of the beautiful birdcage that housed the duke's canary. She sat on the sofa and stared at her feet for a moment, then impulsively stood up again and went out onto the balcony. There was a cool, gentle breeze blowing in from the river. The cold, winter night when she and the duke had agreed on their deal, the deal that would determine Uncle Bill's fate, now seemed like the distant past. It was hard to believe that it was just a season ago.

She slowly approached the balcony's railing and looked down at the Schulter River. Having been frozen over throughout the winter, the river was now flowing freely. The bright moonlight was glittering on the surface of the water.

"So pretty..." she muttered, thinking, *I hope my heart will soon be able to flow as freely as this river.*

She was roused from her thoughts by the sound of the duke approaching. She flinched, then looked up and saw him leaning against the railing near her. As they made eye contact, the look in his eyes was as cool and gentle as the night breeze.

"The flowers are in bloom," he said, breaking the silence.

Her eyes widened at the unexpected remark. "The flowers? Oh..." She looked away awkwardly and tightened her grip on the railing as she recalled the promise she had made him.

"Next weekend should be perfect," he added.

"Pardon?"

“For us to go to the place that you said you'd show me.” He slowly reached out and caressed her blonde hair, which was being gently tossed about by the breeze.

She stared at him, not sure what to say. He was dressed more casually than usual, wearing a cream-colored tennis sweater and flannel pants. She almost felt like she was looking at a stranger.

“Instead of next weekend, how about this weekend?” she asked, forcing herself to smile. “All the flowers are pretty much in bloom already, after all.” *I can't let myself lose strength now*, she thought. *Not after working so hard to get to this point.*

“I have to go to Ratse this weekend,” he replied, sweeping his hair away from his face.

Usually he kept his hair slicked back with pomade, but now it appeared not to have any product in it. His bangs sat freely on his forehead. Seeing him like this, the image of him as a schoolchild suddenly flashed into her mind. Then she remembered when she was a young girl wandering around the heavenly Arvis, when she had run into him, Arvis's lord, without knowing who he was at first.

“You're going to Ratse?” she asked.

“Yes, for the empress's birthday party. I also have some work to do while I'm in the capital. I won't be back until the end of next week.”

“Ah...” she replied, nodding. *So he'll be spending the week with his fiancée.*

Once again, she looked down at the river. Ever since summer had started to approach, talk of the duke's upcoming wedding had been on everyone's lips. During her lunch break at the school, her colleagues had conversed about little else than their admiration and envy of Lady Claudine, who would soon be the next Duchess Herhardt. As always, Layla had kept a smile plastered on her face and agreed with everyone's words of praise. The wedding ceremony was sure to be magnificently grand and beautiful.

“The river looks so pretty from here. It's like I'm looking at stars flowing by,” she said. It occurred to her that she would probably

remember this sight for a long time to come. She readily accepted this.

“But Your Majesty,” he replied, snickering, “isn't my queen afraid of the water?”

She frowned at him. “Don't tease me like that. I'm not your queen.”

“I seem to recall you saying it yourself,” he replied, shrugging. “You said that if I was a gentleman, you were a queen.”

“I said that back when you *were* a gentleman,” she replied, not avoiding his gaze.

She suddenly became aware of all the time that had passed since she had first met him. His frame was much stronger and sturdier, and he looked much more mature now, but he was just as attractive now as he had been then.

“You're not a gentleman at all now, so you can just call me Layla.” She quickly lowered her head, but there was no avoiding him.

He stepped in front of her and, putting his hand to her cheek, said, “This summer, I'll teach you how to swim.” He glanced down at the river, then looked at her again. “That way, you can know what it feels like to flow among the stars.”

She was taken aback by this unexpected promise. “You're lying,” she found herself saying in a shaky voice. “This summer, I won't be here anymore.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“I have to leave Arvis once you're married,” she continued. “So we'll never be able to be here together again.”

“Yes... you're right,” he reluctantly replied.

“See? You were lying,” she scoffed.

“I'll still teach you to swim,” he said. “The Schulter isn't the only river in the world.”

“Everything's so easy for you,” she observed.

“There's no need to overcomplicate easy things,” he replied.

“Then... is that how you think of me, too?” she impulsively asked.

He had wanted her, so he had taken her for himself and made her his mistress. He was going to marry someone else and live a life of luxury, without any concern about the fact that Layla would have to live the rest of her life in the shadows. His life would continue to be easy, ever so easy.

He said nothing in response, so she asked again, more earnestly, “Do you think of me as just another easy thing? If not... do you feel sorry for me at all?” She was done trying to keep up the act. Her feelings were too strong for her to pretend like she was cheerfully enamored of him. Even though she expected to get nothing out of asking him this, she continued. “When you think about everything you've done to me, do you regret it? Even a little bit?”

She was going to run away. She had not wavered in this resolution at all. No matter what happened, she was going to vanish from the duke and duchess's married life.

However, if he were to show even the slightest hint of sincere feelings for her, if she could detect a faint glimmer of anything besides lust, obsession, hatred, and sadism in his attitude towards her, then she knew that the revenge on him that she was pursuing would also leave a scar in her heart, and perhaps she would reconsider the whole thing.

They gazed at each other silently for a long time.

Finally, he calmly replied, “No. I don't regret anything.”

His arrogant, unremorseful face still looked as handsome as ever.

“I didn't think so,” she replied, smiling faintly.

“What about you?” he softly asked. His blue eyes looked as deep as the river.

“I feel the same way,” she replied. Putting on the prettiest smile she could muster, she reached up to caress his cheek. “I don't regret anything either.”

It was the most sincere thing she could say to him.

* * *

A nightingale's full-throated song rang out from the dark forest.

From somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted in response.

The night breeze ruffled Bill's hair. He brushed it back with a stiff hand. He stared at the riverside cabin in front of him, but dared not take another step towards it. He could see that the lights were on inside.

He had impulsively decided to follow Layla after he had seen the ghostly image of her walking outside again. He had wondered with some concern if she might have been sleepwalking.

While he was following her, she had suddenly disappeared from his sight. He had hurried out of the woods, but she had been nowhere to be seen. He had looked carefully along the empty riverbank, and the river flowing beyond it, before discovering the dark cabin.

At first, he hadn't believed his eyes, thinking that the disgraceful letter was causing him to see things. Just as he was about to turn back, however, he had seen a man walking towards the cabin from the other direction. Bill had then quickly hidden behind a tree. It hadn't taken long for him to recognize who the man was. It was the duke.

He had continued to watch as Duke Herhardt calmly climbed the stairs, entered the cabin, and turned on the lights inside. Bill had breathed a sigh of relief, concluding that, since the lights hadn't been on, Layla must not be in the cabin. However, a lingering doubt deep in his heart kept him from being able to leave.

“Pull yourself together, Bill,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head.

For all he knew, Layla had simply gone out for a nighttime stroll. Maybe she was already back in her bed in the cottage, sound asleep.

Just as he was finally about to turn back, he heard the sound of a door opening and saw the duke walk out onto the cabin's balcony. There was a woman there as well.

Bill dreaded to think who it was.

* * *

As Layla walked down the stairs on the outside of the cabin, her face was expressionless and as pale as the moonlight. There was no trace of the warm smile she had shown the duke before kissing him.

As she reached the bottom of the staircase, she adjusted her glasses and took a moment to catch her breath. Then she started briskly walking, as if there was nothing wrong.

It was a night like any other night. She had experienced so many similar nights since the winter, she didn't feel especially hurt or shaken by this one. Instead, she felt lighthearted and relieved at the thought that this long procession of nights would soon be coming to an end. Reflecting on this, she started smiling cheerfully. Her steps also grew lighter, until she was frolicking through the woods like she had loved to do as a little girl.

*See? You're doing a good job,* she thought to herself, smiling proudly. Just then, however, she felt something warm running down her cheek. Confused, she blinked rapidly, and then she felt the same sensation again and again. Only once her vision grew cloudy did she realize that tears were falling from her eyes.

She picked up her pace, but the tears wouldn't stop. Unsure of what was going on, she laughed even as she continued to cry. She thought back to the snowy winter night when she had decided to hate the duke. If she had known how cumbersome it was to harbor hate, she might have reconsidered her decision. It felt like a hot lump of metal was pressing down on her heart. She wanted to let go of the hate, but she wasn't sure how to do it.

Perhaps the hate would vanish once she left Arvis? She prayed that this would be the case. When it came to things related to the duke, she didn't even want to hold onto her hatred. If it were only possible, she would have liked to have all her memories of him wiped from her mind, so that she wouldn't even know who he was anymore.

As she turned from the riverside onto the forest path, her stifled tears gave way to sobbing. Her fierce hatred for the duke made it impossible to stop crying. To her tear-filled eyes, the forest path

looked like an endless maze.

Just then, amid her sobs, she heard a shaky voice call out to her.

“Layla!”

Without even thinking to wipe her tears away, she turned in the direction of the voice. She was sure it had been her imagination. It had to have been.

Her eyes went wide. “Uncle Bill…?”

Bill, who normally stood tall and sturdy as a tree, was walking towards her with a hesitant, wavering gait. Still wondering if she was imagining things, she blinked several times and wiped the tears from her eyes, but she still saw him in front of her. Soon his shadow reached her feet.

She winced at him, her face flushed red, and then her legs gave out and she collapsed to the ground.

# Chapter 109:
## Final Wish

The morning sun was shining brightly, but it was still quiet in the cottage. Layla's tears had dried. She was staring blankly at the sun's glare reflected in the surface of the old kitchen table.

As she slowly closed and opened her unfocused eyes, her mind kept flashing through disjointed memories from the previous night. She saw Uncle Bill standing in the woods, crying. She heard the flapping wings of the birds whose slumber had been disturbed by his sobs. She felt the tears that had run down her cheeks as she clutched at his coat, begging him to stop after he declared that he was going to go find the duke and kill him. All these fractured memories seemed strange and alien to her now.

Finally, Bill's hoarse voice broke the silence. “You can't continue doing this, Layla. Something bad must have happened… something very bad. Otherwise, you never would've done this, I'm sure of it.”

He felt like his heart was being torn apart as he remembered Layla as a little girl arriving one day in the mail coach, an upright, good little girl who grew up to be prettier than any flower he had grown in his whole life.

*I'd rather die than see her living life as the duke's mistress,* he thought. *But no, I can't die. First I have to kill him.*

“Tell me, Layla. Tell me what the duke is holding over your head.”

“Uncle Bill...”

“And don't even think about lying to me. I know that you would sooner die than voluntarily engage in that sort of behavior.”

Her face stained with deep fear and despair, Layla looked less like someone blinded by ignoble love, and more like an animal cornered by a hunter.

“Is he threatening you? Is he blackmailing you? What could he possibly...”

Bill suddenly fell silent as a horrible thought crossed his mind. The shift in Layla's behavior had occurred in the winter, after his accident. More specifically, it was right around when the duke had dropped the charges against him, a display of generosity far beyond what anyone would have expected an aristocrat to show to a member of his staff.

"Don't tell me..."

The color started to drain from Bill's face. Could it be that it wasn't merely the duke's extraordinary generosity that had saved Bill from prison? Could the duke have demanded something in return? And what about the duke's decision to let Bill keep his job? What about his offer to sponsor Layla's college education? Could it all have been part of a dirty, shameful deal?

"N-no!" Layla shouted, shaking her head. "It's not like that. Not at all, Uncle Bill!" She bolted up from her seat and kneeled down in front of him. "It's all my fault. I've been doing bad things out of my own greed. I'm sorry, Uncle Bill. I did wrong. It's all my fault."

*She's lying,* he thought. Before this thought entered his mind, he had already felt the pain of it in his heart.

He wanted to bite his tongue as he remembered believing that all the good fortune they had met had been because of the amazing kindness of that noble gentleman, Duke Herhardt.

"Not only did I only get out of jail because you traded your body for my freedom, but I called that scoundrel my savior...!"

"No. It's not like that, Uncle Bill. Not at all. No!"

"I won't let this stand! I'm going to kill that bastard myself!"

He rose from his seat full of rage, but was stopped short as another thought occurred to him. If he did anything to the duke, it would ruin Layla's reputation. In the court of public opinion, if it came down to a contest between Duke Herhardt and Layla, it was obvious who everyone would side with.

"Please, Uncle Bill, please don't! I couldn't live with myself if you went back to jail. Okay?" She moved closer to him and grabbed his hands. "I'm... I'm going to end it all. I'm going to run away. Before

he's married, I'm going to be far, far away. I'm never going to see him again. I promise."

Only then did he understand why she had been so stubborn about not wanting to accept the Herhardt family's sponsorship, and why she had proposed that they move to a distant city. It had been a cry for help that he had completely missed, blinded by his admiration for what he believed was the duke's kindness.

"Layla! You poor thing!"

He burst into tears and flopped back down onto his chair. Indifferent to his sadness, the morning sunlight continued to shine with a harsh intensity.

* * *

Hessen quietly approached the duke and said, "Preparations for your departure are complete, Your Grace."

Matthias nodded and stood up. His assistant then walked over to him and started brushing his suit jacket with a clothes brush. While he was waiting for his assistant to finish, he looked out the window at the large garden down below. It was almost time for the roses to start blooming.

*Layla, you came into my world just like a flower coming into bloom,* he thought. A faint smile crept onto his face.

It looked like Layla hadn't left for work yet. Perhaps he would be able to catch a brief, distant glimpse of her.

Before leaving his bedroom, he walked over to the birdcage. His canary was sitting on its perch, bobbing its head. He tapped gently on the one of the bars of the cage with his finger, and the bird chirped in response. Just like every other day, his bird was happy in its cozy cage.

After that short greeting, he left his bedroom. Just as it was occurring to him that he had forgotten to ask Layla if she had decided on a birthday present, he reached the mansion's front door.

"Huh? Mr. Remmer?" his assistant said, stepping forward towards the gardener, who was standing in the driveway, gripping a dirty

shovel.

Matthias, who had been about to get in the car, turned his head. “What's the matter?”

Hessen, the butler, tried to intervene, but Bill kept staring straight at the duke. Bill had always been a little rough around the edges, but he had never displayed this level of blatant rudeness. The other staff members who knew him well exchanged concerned glances.

“Hey, Bill.”

Bill gulped. Trying to stay calm, he said, “N-never mind...”

The knuckles of the hand with which he was gripping the shovel were white. As he thought back to Layla down on her knees, begging him not to do anything to the duke, he was finally able to take a step back.

Gritting his teeth, he bowed subserviently to the man he wanted to kill. The duke nodded and got into the car. He looked just like the perfect gentleman Bill had always known, the Duke Herhardt that everyone admired.

After the car drove off, Hessen approached Bill with a stern expression on his face. “Bill, this isn't like you. What on earth is going on?”

Bill took a deep breath to stifle the urge he was feeling to swing the shovel at Hessen.

As the butler, Hessen knew everything that went on in the House of Herhardt. There was no way he was unaware of what was going on between the duke and Layla. He had probably helped the duke get to her, thinking that it didn't matter what sorts of horrendous things he did, as long as they were for his master...

However, Bill once again mustered all his self-control to suppress his anger, and simply replied, “It's nothing.”

Everything felt meaningless to him now. His coworkers, who had been like family to him for decades; Arvis's garden, which he had grown old tending to; he was fed up with all of it.

“I... I just wanted to bid His Grace farewell. What's the matter

with that?”

After giving this uncharacteristically wordy response, he hurried back to the garden. When he reached the flowerbed he had been working on when little Layla had first arrived in the mail coach, intense anger and despair surged up inside of him.

He flung the shovel to the ground and left the garden. Startled by his unusual behavior, his helpers grew concerned, but none of them dared ask him what was wrong.

When he reached the cottage's front yard, the mailman walked up to him, smiling. “Oh, Mr. Remmer! You're here.”

With trembling hands, Bill took the telegram that the mailman was holding out to him. It was a response to a telegram he had sent a few days earlier. Once the mailman left, he hurriedly opened the envelope and read the telegram. After a brief feeling of relief, his eyes grew stony with renewed determination.

He was going to protect Layla. All other thoughts faded away from his mind, leaving only that singular resolution. He was willing to lose everything else for the sake of protecting her. There was nothing in his life as precious or important to him as that girl.

* * *

“Miss Llewellyn, are you feeling sick?” Monica asked, looking worriedly at her princess teacher. “Miss Llewellyn...?!” As her teacher continued not to respond, Monica's eyes started to fill with tears.

Layla kept staring blankly at her desk until Monica reached out and shook her arm. “Oh... I'm sorry, Monica.” Rubbing her bloodshot eyes, she quickly picked up her glasses and put them back on. “Why haven't you gone home yet, dear?”

Seeing her teacher smiling again, Monica was relieved. Her princess teacher was back. “Because you looked like you were sick. Don't die, Miss Llewellyn,” she said, bursting into tears.

Seeing Monica in this state snapped Layla out of her daze.

“That's what happened to my mommy,” Monica said. “She looked

sick like you, and then she went up to heaven."

"Don't worry, Monica. I'm not sick. I'm fine. I promise. Okay?" Layla said, quickly rising from her seat and embracing the crying girl.

*I couldn't even hide my feelings from a child,* she thought. *How pathetic.*

Once Monica had finished crying, she said "Here, I made this for you." She held out a bouquet of wildflowers she had gathered. They were already wilted, but the little yellow flowers warmed Layla's heart.

"Thank you, Monica."

"Don't get sick, okay?"

"Okay, I won't."

"You promise?"

"I promise," Layla replied, nodding her head.

Monica smiled. Layla took out her handkerchief and wiped away Monica's tears, then tidied her messy hair.

Monica then left, leaving the classroom in silence, the way it usually was in the late afternoon. Layla sat at her desk for a while longer, then grabbed her bag and stood up.

That morning, after several days of silence, Uncle Bill had finally spoken, saying, *"Let's go, Layla."*

She had been about to leave for work when he had walked up to her with a determined look on his face and continued, saying, *"I won't let him have you for another day. Let's go somewhere far away, where the duke can never find you."* As he said this, his eyes had been filled with cold rage.

Layla had found his proposal daunting, but she had immediately nodded. She had already been planning to leave, anyway. She had never intended for Uncle Bill to have to suffer the misfortune of finding out about everything, but there was no way to undo that now that it had happened.

Now she only had one remaining wish, and that was to leave the duke. She could go anywhere in the world, as long as he wasn't

there. She wanted to completely remove him from her life, so that she and Uncle Bill could live an ordinary life together again.

Rubbing her bloodshot eyes, she quickly climbed onto her bicycle. As she left the city and turned onto the road leading to Arvis, she remembered the afternoon when she had ridden in the mail coach to meet Uncle Bill.

With her arms wrapped around her worn-out suitcase, she had practiced her smile and earnestly prayed that Uncle Bill would like her. She had promised herself that if he did, she would be a good girl.

She had tried so hard to keep that promise, but in the end she had broken it. She had committed an unforgivable wrong, and broken Uncle Bill's heart.

*I never should've come here,* she thought. *Instead of crossing the border from Lovita to Berg, I should've gone to an orphanage. Then I never would've met the duke, and I wouldn't have had to endure all this pain. More importantly, Kyle and Uncle Bill wouldn't have had their hearts broken.*

However, she realized with self-disgust that even if she were able to do it all over again, she still would have held out hope and gone to see Uncle Bill.

Just then, a car turned around the bend in the road. It was the duke's car.

# Chapter 110:
## Forever and Ever

At the duke's direction, the chauffeur pulled the car over on the side of Platanus Road. The deep-green leaves were rustling in the evening breeze.

Matthias got out of the car and sauntered across the shadowy road towards his Layla, who was standing in the shade of a tree.

The two of them looked at each other for a while, saying nothing. The only sound was that of the leaves in the trees.

Glancing at his watch, Matthias finally broke the silence, asking, “Have you made up your mind yet?”

His departure had been delayed because of a lunch meeting. He couldn't miss the evening train, or he wouldn't make it to Ratse in time for the empress's birthday party.

“About the birthday present you want, I mean,” he added.

“Oh, that,” she replied. As she stood there, gripping her bicycle's handlebars tightly, she looked even smaller and more youthful than usual. She gazed at him, saying nothing more.

He enjoyed watching her silently gather her thoughts. Even more, he enjoyed when she finally thought of something to say, and he got to hear her soft, pleasing voice.

He liked so much about her. He liked the way she thought and the way she spoke. He liked the shadows that her long eyelashes cast on her face. He liked her smooth, round cheeks, and her pretty, smiling lips. He liked the tough, defiant attitude she sometimes took with him, and the vibrant look in her eyes when she spoke her mind. He liked her rosy complexion and quick breathing, and the way she no longer trembled in fright when she saw him. He liked the way her smooth, petite body hung onto his, as if the two of them were the only people in the world. All these things gave him great pleasure.

“I've made up my mind,” she finally said, smiling. Only then did

the sickly pallor leave her face, to be replaced by a healthy glow. “Should I tell you?”

“Yes, tell me what it is.”

“If I tell you, will you give it to me?” she asked in a pestering tone.

The cold look in his eyes softened. “Sure,” he replied, smiling. “I will.”

The smile quickly faded from his lips, but it left a trace of warmth behind.

She gazed at him with an expression as calm and peaceful as the spring breeze.

She knew that he was too set in his ways to immediately break down over the loss of a mere mistress. Most likely, he would experience some brief anger, and then continue on with his happy life and become Claudine's husband.

Since she knew that losing his mistress wouldn't have much of an effect in the short term, she prayed to God that his yearning for her would become a long-term illness.

To that end, she slowly opened her lips and said, “I want you to love me.”

Her hair fluttered in the cool breeze.

“I would like it so much if you loved me,” she said, smiling brightly at him.

She hoped that this request would lodge itself deep inside him, and start to fester there, like a wound that wouldn't heal. She hoped that he would go along with his life, thinking that he was doing fine, until one day the wound would be too much for him, and he would finally collapse.

Then, perhaps, he would finally cry over her, just like she had cried so many times because of him.

The hard-to-read expression on his face was gently illuminated by the golden light of the evening sun. She couldn't believe it, but standing there with him was making her tear up. To hide this, she made herself smiling even more brightly. This was easy to do when

she thought about how he had ruined her life without remorse, and she thought about Kyle's tears, or Uncle Bill's sobs.

“I want you to love me deeply. Forever and ever,” she sweetly whispered.

*Goodbye,* she thought. *Goodbye forever.*

* * *

Standing next to the open rear door of the car, Mark Evers looked nervously at his watch. The servants standing behind him looked just as worried.

The train's departure time was fast approaching, but the duke was showing no sign of being ready to leave. The contours of his face stood out in the darkening evening sunlight.

Finally, deciding that there was no time left to delay, Mark politely said, “Your Grace?”

Matthias then finally turned his head towards the car. He looked more or less like he always did, with a calm expression on his face, but there was a subtle difference. He looked like someone who had lost something important but didn't know it yet.

“The train will be departing soon, Your Grace. We need to leave at once,” Mark said.

“Of course,” Matthias quietly replied. “Let's go.” He walked in his usual, restrained manner back towards the car and got in. His servants got in after him.

The train station was crowded, but fortunately, no one blocked the duke's path as he walked towards the platform. As a result, the train to Ratse was still there when he arrived at the platform.

He quickly stepped back to allow the crowd of other passengers to rush into the train first. He was one of the last passengers to board. Shortly after he did, the train started huffing and puffing and slowly began to move.

Sitting in his seat, he squinted as he watched the scenery flowing past outside the window. He reminded himself that going to the capital was an ordinary part of his life as an aristocrat and a

businessman. And this was only going to be a short, week-long trip. There was no reason for him to be feeling as anxious about it as he was.

He stopped looking out the window and leaned back into his seat. As soon as he did, Layla's bright-green eyes flashed into his mind. They were the same color as the new spring leaves on the trees.

He couldn't believe that she had asked him to love her. He had not expected that this would be her birthday present request.

Perhaps that was why he was gripped by this strange feeling that he couldn't get rid of. He hadn't known what to say in response.

He had just stared at her after she made her request. He hadn't wanted to stay silent, but hearing her utter the word love out of the blue had left him at a loss for words.

For a moment, they had been immersed in a sweet silence. It had felt like the rest of the world had melted away. That moment had quickly passed, however. His assistant, not daring to approach them, had cleared his throat a few times, to indicate that they urgently had to leave. Finally, Matthias had taken the hint.

Before turning away from her, however, he had taken one last look into her beautiful, green eyes, and let out a bitter chuckle. For all he knew, she was trying to manipulate him, but he didn't care.

He felt like the world was caving in underneath him, but he wasn't falling. It was as if she had wings. Even as she was destroying his life, he felt like she was saving him.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw her face superimposed over the dark sky.

When he had started to walk back towards the car, she hadn't tried to stop him. She had remained standing where she was, watching him walk away. She had remained standing there long after the car had started driving away.

She had grown smaller and smaller in the distance, until she was no longer visible. Even then, however, he had looked over his shoulder several more times, clenching his fists and gulping nervously each time. There was a feeling of irritation deep in his

chest that grew more and more intense the farther away he was from her.

Sitting in the train, he glanced again over his shoulder at the scenery growing distant behind them, trying to comfort himself with the thought that she was somewhere back there.

* * *

These moments continued after he arrived in Ratse. Even as he was faithfully carrying out his duties as Duke Herhardt, he kept glancing over his shoulder from time to time. He did this in the imperial palace's magnificent banquet hall. He did it as his car drove past the natural history museum in downtown Ratse. He did it each time he passed by a petite young woman with blonde hair.

Each time this happened, the image of Layla's face at their last meeting grew clearer in his memory. The brightness of her smile made him anxious. It pained him to think that this radiant young woman would soon be confined to the shadows.

Out of habit, he rose from his seat, walked over to the window, and opened the curtains. Only when he saw the scenery outside the window did he remember that he wasn't in Arvis. He gazed down at the city that would soon be Layla's new home.

She had claimed that everything was easy for him. He had readily agreed with this. He had an easy life. When he wanted something, he took it. When he attempted something, he achieved it. All without worrying what anyone else thought.

This utterly simple, straightforward life of his had been infiltrated by emotions that were anything but simple. Thinking back on it, this seemed to have begun the previous summer, on that sunny afternoon when Layla had fallen from her bicycle on Platanus Road.

He felt like he could still hear the sound of the overturned bicycle's wheels spinning in the air, along with the rustling of the leaves, and the pounding of his heart.

Yes, everything in his life was easy.

Everything but her.

He let out a deep sigh as he leaned against the window frame.

The Brandt family was going to be visiting the Herhardt Ratse mansion today, to discuss the final preparations for the wedding.

He was going to be married very soon. That had nothing to do with Layla. It couldn't have anything to do with her. Thus he needed to stop looking over his shoulder. He needed to keep walking forwards towards the future, towards the life he was supposed to lead.

But was such a life really possible?

Just as he was flooded with a sudden feeling of intense doubt, he heard a knock at his door. It was a maid informing him that the Brandt family had arrived early.

* * *

Wearing a newly made spring dress, Claudine looked as pretty and vibrant as a just-bloomed flower. The duke's mother and grandmother looked at her with unabashed satisfaction.

At the party at the imperial palace the previous night, Claudine had received more attention than any other lady in attendance.

In aristocratic social circles, expectations were extremely high for the next Duchess Herhardt, but Claudine had more than enough charm and beauty to meet those expectations. Even the haughty empress acknowledged her merits, despite the fact that Claudine had won out over the empress's own daughter for the role of Duke Herhardt's wife. All that remained now was the wedding for which the Herhardt and Brandt families had been preparing for so long. Then Claudine would be a Herhardt, and she would pass that honor onto the next generation.

“Oh, Duke Herhardt, you're here!” Claudine exclaimed as soon as she saw Matthias enter the drawing room.

Matthias bowed politely, then walked towards her with unhurried steps.

He looked like his usual self, but Claudine felt like something was somehow awry. She had felt this way the previous night as well.

Even as she stood next to her flawless fiancé, he hadn't seemed to really see her. Not even when they were making eye contact.

After greeting everyone, Matthias suddenly asked Claudine, “Would you care to go for a stroll with me in the garden?”

Not only Claudine but everyone present was surprised to hear this unprecedented proposal.

“A stroll...? Just the two of us?” she asked.

“Yes, my lady. I have something to talk to you about.”

In that moment, she finally felt like he was seeing her. However, she didn't like it one bit. She had an ominous feeling that she wasn't going to like hearing whatever it was he wanted to talk to her about. She sensed that it was something he would be better off saving at least until the end of the summer to bring up.

Just as she was about to turn down his offer, a servant came rushing into the drawing room.

“Y-your Grace!”

It was the duke's assistant.

“What is the meaning of this, Evers? We have guests,” Elise von Herhardt said, frowning.

The duke's assistant didn't back down, however. It was clear that he had urgent news.

“What's the matter?” Matthias asked, sensing that something out of the ordinary was afoot.

All eyes were on the assistant. After gulping nervously, he replied, “An urgent message has just arrived from Arvis.”

# Chapter 111:
## Such a Trivial Matter

“A message? What's the message?”

“Well...”

“Spit it out, Evers,” the duke said, frowning.

Mark Evers gulped nervously and wiped the sweat from his brow, then stammered, “Th-the gardener and his adopted daughter have d-disappeared.”

Without meaning to, Claudine clasped her hands together in excitement. Luckily for her, no one noticed this.

“Apparently, they left Arvis in the middle of the night, as if they were running away,” Mark added.

“Bill Remmer ran away?! I can't believe it...” Dowager Herhardt exclaimed.

Lady Herhardt and Count and Countess Brandt looked just as surprised by the completely unexpected news.

“Goodness, Layla ran away? Why would she do that?” Claudine asked, forcing a look of surprise as she turned towards Matthias.

*I guess the gardener received my letter,* she thought. She had to draw on all her years of aristocratic deportment training to stop herself from bursting into delighted laughter.

“You'll probably want to deal with this situation right away, so perhaps we should put off discussing the wedding until next time,” she said, looking with pity at her fiancé. She felt like praising Layla for her irritating self-pride.

*Look at you, Duke Herhardt,* she thought, noticing that Matthias wasn't saying anything. *What's the matter, cat got your tongue?* She gazed at him with partly sincere sympathy.

Unlike his mother and grandmother, who were visibly flustered, his face remained cold and still. Claudine could tell, however, that something was different inside of him.

“I'm sorry,” he finally said, rising from his seat. Even in this

urgent moment, he stood with perfect posture. “I will have to attend to the situation at the Arvis estate, so I won't be able to join you for lunch today.”

Although he said this in a flat voice devoid of emotion, his anxiousness was visible in the way he was fiddling with his jacket button.

As soon as Claudine noticed this, she decided to forgive Layla for everything.

Her fiancé was finally experiencing the hurt of losing someone he loved, just like she was with Riette. It was a highly satisfying conclusion.

* * *

The train crossed the border in the dead of night. It was too dark to see much of the scenery out the window, but Layla was able to picture it all. She still remembered traveling in the other direction on this same route all those years ago, when she had left her hometown and ventured to a foreign country, all alone.

She held her breath as she gazed out the window, just as she had done as a little girl. Her reflection in the dark window melded in her mind into the image of herself as a child, which made her laugh bitterly. That little girl's eyes had been twinkling with trepidation and excitement as she crossed the border into the Berg Empire. Now she was a young woman with eyes full of fatigue and a heart full of pain as she crossed back into Lovita.

“Look at me instead, kiddo,” Uncle Bill said.

Having thought that he was asleep, she jumped at the sound of his voice and turned to look at him.

“We still have a long way to go. I guess you probably know that, though. It's your home country, after all.” His face looked exhausted, but he was smiling warmly.

She smiled back at him. She felt grateful for the sound of the train chugging along, and for the sound of the various people snoring around them in the compartment. If it hadn't been for the

noise, she might have found the silence unbearable. She wrapped the blanket Uncle Bill had given her around herself and closed her eyes.

When he had proposed that they go to Lovita, she hadn't believed it at first. He demonstrated how serious he was, however, by getting packed up and ready to leave in the blink of an eye. Since they were trying to run away without attracting any attention, they had to leave most of their belongings behind. Along with the money he had saved up, he filled one large trunk with clothes and supplies, and that was it.

He told her that he had a distant relative who lived in a city on the southern coast of Lovita. They weren't very close, but Uncle Bill had sent a telegram to him, and the relative had responded, saying that he would help them get settled down once they arrived.

Unable to fall asleep, Layla opened her eyes and turned to her uncle. “I'm sorry, Uncle Bill. If I hadn't come to live with you...”

“Stop, Layla. I won't hear another word of that kind of talk,” he replied, looking sternly back at her. “There is nothing in my life more precious than you, kiddo. The day you arrived at Arvis in that mail coach was the day my life began. I'm serious.” He patted her head and smiled.

He was telling the truth. Before Layla, his life had been tranquil but monotonous, and it probably still would be, if he hadn't started taking care of her. However, he had no desire to go back to that way of life. How could he? It would be like going back to a black-and-white world after experiencing a world full of bright, vibrant colors.

“We'll be able to make a good life for ourselves wherever we are, just like we have already,” he said.

The two of them gazed at each other for a long time as they sat in the rattling third-class compartment. Smiles spread across each of their faces, while their eyes also started to well up with tears. It was just like the first time they had sat across from each other at the kitchen table, all those years ago.

*Yes, it's going to be all right,* she muttered to herself.

Eventually, night gave way to dawn, and the sky started to brighten. By this point, Uncle Bill was fast asleep, snoring loudly.

She took the blanket he had given her, and placed it on him, then looked out the window again. The train was passing by a huge field filled with spring flowers in full bloom. Not wanting to look back, she closed her eyes.

* * *

It was a nighttime getaway. There was no other way to describe the gardener and his adopted daughter's disappearance.

“Did you try the school?” Hessen asked Mark Evers when he appeared in Hessen's office.

Mark nodded regretfully. “Yes, I met with the principal. He was distraught to hear that Miss Llewellyn had disappeared in that manner, but he didn't have any new information for us.”

“I see. How is the search for family members going?”

“The last remaining member of Mr. Remmer's immediate family was his older brother, who passed away two years ago. We have no information on other relatives of his.”

“Goodness, this isn't going well...” Hessen lamented, rubbing his forehead.

The duke had returned to Arvis immediately after hearing about the gardener's disappearance. In a calm voice he had given Hessen a concise command: *“Find them.”* The coldness with which he had said this made a chill run down Hessen's spine. He would have preferred it if the duke had yelled at him or interrogated him. His deceptively simple command was much harder to deal with.

Other than his speedy return to Arvis, there was nothing in the duke's behavior that suggested he was especially concerned about the situation. For days after his return, he seemed completely relaxed. Observing this, Hessen had to wonder if he had been too hasty in concluding that the duke's feelings for Layla went beyond mere lust.

“He hasn't said anything about them since issuing the command to find them,” Mark said. “Maybe he's given up? If not, I don't know why-”

Before Mark could finish his sentence, the service bell in Hessen's office rang. It was coming from the third-floor master suite—the duke's bedroom.

* * *

Matthias had an ordinary day. He woke up early and read the newspaper while eating a simple breakfast. He listened to a report sent to him from his company's board of directors, informing him of their concerns about the uneasy international situation on the continent. In the afternoon, he participated in a meeting with these same directors. Among those on the board of directors, some were very worried about the worsening international conflicts, while others were not.

As Matthias listened to these two factions argue at length, he looked like an audience member watching a long, boring play. He felt that each side had a point. After reflecting for a moment, he decided that he really didn't care who was right. Realizing that this was quite an irresponsible position for the head of the company to hold, he laughed aloud at himself. He could sense the uncomfortable glances of the directors at the conference table, but it wasn't easy to stop laughing.

When he finally regained his composure, the conference room had gone silent. “Please excuse me,” he said, straightening his posture. A friendly smile returned to his lips.

Everything went back to normal after that. Matthias skillfully synthesized the views of both sides and arrived at a compromise. Fleshing out the details would be the job of the specialists working under him. The company had originated in his family, but as it expanded over the years and generations, the management had been systematically subdivided. Matthias's role was to listen to the opinions of the directors and make top-level decisions. His training

and education had prepared him for this duty, and he fulfilled it without difficulty.

After the meeting, he went to a dinner party he had been invited to. Surrounded by familiar faces, he had a pleasant evening just like countless other pleasant evenings. He dined, laughed, and conversed in the same refined manner as always. He himself was surprised how peaceful the day had been.

“Excuse me, Your Grace,” Hessen finally said, having waited quite a while before breaking the silence.

Only then did Matthias realize that his butler had been standing next to him. Hessen reported that no progress had been made in the search. Neither the gardener nor his adopted daughter had any known relatives or other connections, so it was going to be extremely difficult to ascertain their whereabouts.

As if he hadn't heard a word Hessen had said, Matthias repeated the same command he had issued the night he had first returned to Arvis: “Find them.”

Flustered, Hessen cleared his throat a few times before weakly replying, “But Your Grace, as I told you-”

“There must be someone in this world who has a connection to them,” Matthias said. He slowly closed his eyes and then even more slowly opened them. He looked exhausted, perhaps because he had been busy all day since the early morning. “Use whatever means necessary. But find them,” he added, shutting his weary eyes again. He leaned his head back, sticking his well-defined chin up into the air.

Hessen had noticed that although the duke had by all appearances been free of stress since returning to Arvis, he was looking a little gaunt. He thought it better not to mention this, however, and only replied, “Yes, Your Grace, I will.”

After Hessen left, Matthias's bedroom was dead silent. He leaned back into his chair and remained in that position for a long while. He was still wearing his tailcoat from the party, but he didn't feel any discomfort.

*I fell into her trap,* he thought. He had realized this the moment he first heard the news that she had suddenly run away.

He had already been certain she was plotting something, but he had never imagined it was something this grand.

Thinking about it, he laughed, just as he had when he first heard the news. *She whispered words of love to me just so that she could run away,* he thought. *How fitting for someone so fond of driving me wild.*

To cut off the endless cycle of thoughts swirling in his head, he stood up and told himself, *They'll find her. They'll find her soon.*

* * *

After slowly undressing, Matthias took a longer-than-usual shower and then went to bed. The following day started off identically to the previous one. He awoke at his usual time and ate breakfast.

As his car passed through the gates of the mansion, he was suddenly hit with a deep feeling of emptiness. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but it wasn't unbearable either. However, in the back of his mind, there was an uneasy feeling that if Layla was really gone for good, his whole life was going to collapse. He found his obsessiveness over such a petty thing utterly ridiculous, so much so that he burst into laughter.

*Why am I fretting over such a trivial matter?*

He leaned back into the seat as he continued to laugh.

*Perhaps I should be thankful. I almost made an irreparable mistake over a lowly, insignificant woman.*

Once these thoughts stopped swirling in his head, the twisted smile on his lips faded away. The car was now passing through the shade made by the thick foliage of the trees on Platanus Road.

Gazing at the waves of green undulating through the forest, he chuckled.

*How ridiculous all of this is.*

# Chapter 112:
## What If...

Matthias's memories were triggered by an unexpected source. He was riding in the car, when he happened to see a group of schoolgirls walking down the sidewalk.

He watched them for a short while without thinking anything of it. Then, all of a sudden, he realized that the uniforms they had on were identical to the one Layla had been wearing the day she had fallen from her bicycle.

She had been wearing a blue dress over a white blouse with short, puffed sleeves, and had had a red ribbon tied around her neck. These girls had white ribbons around their necks, suggesting that the ribbon color indicated what grade they were in. Surprised that he remembered anything about Layla's appearance during the accident, he laughed at himself when he realized how detailed his memory of the incident was.

Fortunately, there was no traffic on the road, and his car quickly drove past the group of schoolgirls. He thought that this would be the end of his reminiscences about Layla. But then, as the car left the city and turned onto the road leading to Arvis, he saw a bird perched on a tree branch fly up toward the sky.

This reminded him of the time that Layla had told him that she liked birds because they were always nearby. Only now did he feel like he understood what she had meant. Just as she had said, wherever one went, there were always birds. Thinking about the fact that there were so many birds in the world caused a chill to go down his spine.

He ran his face over his face, then impulsively said, “Stop the car.”

The chauffeur looked surprised, but quickly pulled the car over to the side of the road.

“Y-your Grace!” the chauffeur and Matthias's assistant both

shouted as he got out of the car without a word.

“You go on ahead,” he said. “I'm going to walk the rest of the way back.”

“But your meeting with Count Klein is-”

Before his assistant could finish telling him the meeting time, Matthias shut the car door and started walking down the road.

* * *

The news of Layla's disappearance reached Kyle's ears just as the smell of roses had started to fill the university campus.

It was the week of Layla's birthday, and the season when her favorite flower came into bloom.

To avoid thinking about this, Kyle spent all his waking hours immersed in his studies, staying holed up in lecture halls and the library from the early morning until late at night every day.

Today would have progressed in the same way, if, on his way into the library, he hadn't encountered a group of young men who had gone to the same grade school as he had.

When he recognized them, he gave a brief nod and intended to brush past them. However, one of the men called to him, shouting, “Hey, Kyle!”

It was a magistrate's son from his hometown. They had been fairly close friends since childhood.

After hesitating for a moment, he asked, “So, Kyle... was it you?”

Kyle narrowed his eyes at the sudden question. “Was what me? What are you talking about?”

Lowering his voice, the friend said, “You know... the thing with Layla Llewellyn.”

Without needing to hear anything more, Kyle could already sense that whatever news his friend had about Layla wasn't going to be good. “Why are you bringing Layla up?”

“Don't tell me you haven't heard!”

“Heard what?”

“Arvis's gardener and his adopted daughter, Layla, fled Arvis in

the middle of the night. You really hadn't heard about it?" the friend asked, his eyes widening in surprise. The group standing behind him looked surprised as well.

They could tell that the shock on Kyle's face was too vivid for him to be faking it. Apparently the rumor that Dr. Ettman's son had secretly brought Layla to the capital and was now living with her was false.

"Wow, judging from your reaction, I guess you really didn't know. Gosh... I don't know what to say, Kyle. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have talked about it like that," the friend said, looking embarrassed.

Everyone at the university who came from Karlsbar knew that Kyle and Layla had been planning to get married. The heir to the prestigious doctor's family and the poor orphan girl. Everyone knew how good of a match they had seemed to be, and how tragic of an end their relationship had come to. It had been one of the liveliest gossip topics for a long while.

"Wait," Kyle said, grabbing his friend's shoulder to stop him. "Tell me everything."

It was a warm, spring day full of the scent of roses, but Kyle's face was as pale as someone standing in the middle of a winter snowstorm.

"Tell me exactly what happened with Layla and her uncle. Right now."

* * *

A soft breeze blew through the trees lining Platanus Road, making their verdant leaves rustle. It had been just like that on the day she had fallen from her bicycle, Matthias recalled. Yet another memory from that day that he hadn't realized he still had.

As he thought about it, though, he realized that it hadn't just been that day. Even in the dead of winter, when the trees were bare of leaves, he had always felt like he could hear the sound of the wind passing through leaves when he walked with Layla along this road. In fact, this seemed to be the case no matter where he walked

with her. Perhaps the breeze came from her?

He came to a stop at the spot where he and Layla had stood gazing at each other the last time they had seen each other. His breathing gradually started to grow rougher. He closed his eyes, and covered his face with his hands, which had started to tremble slightly. The breeze started to blow again.

It felt like the breeze hadn't once stopped blowing since the summer when it had started. Prior to then, his heart had been like a still pond. As it gently rustled the verdant foliage around him, the breeze had made ripples in that pond. Now it seemed like the breeze might never stop.

After a long while, he lowered his hands from his face. His red eyes gazed beyond Arvis's gates and saw a bird flying in the distant sky.

He plodded along the road towards the gates, loosening his tie and unbuttoning the top button of his shirt as he went.

Chuckling to himself, he passed through the gates, across the large garden, into the woods, towards Layla's world. The shadows of the swaying branches surrounded him.

He had thought that the yearning he felt for Layla was ruining his perfect life. Now, however, he felt like his life had only truly began after he was seized by that yearning.

With each step he took, he traveled back further into his memory, eventually reaching the summer afternoon when he had turned his head at the sound of an approaching bicycle.

Squinting at the slivers of sunlight passing through the trees, he saw Layla ride past him. Just as she was looking back at him in surprise, she fell. Momentum was causing the wheels of the overturned bicycle to keep spinning. Along with the sound of the wheels, he could hear the sound of his heart beating. It wasn't especially loud, but it was a little faster than normal, as if there were a babbling brook in his chest.

As he gazed down at the girl, the bicycle's wheels came to a stop. The sound of the breeze blowing through the thick forest grew

clearer. As Layla looked up at him, her narrowed eyes reflected the eternal summer of the forest surrounding them.

He called her name: “Layla...”

The embarrassment in the young woman's eyes disappeared, leaving in its place a relaxed warmth similar to the warmth of the river at the height of summer. As if to dive into that warm river, he extended his hand to her. She hesitated for a moment, and then accepted his hand. As they stood facing each other, a refreshing breeze blew past them.

He chuckled, and she smiled back at him. It was a beautiful smile.

*If our relationship had started like that, would things have ended up differently between us?* he wondered.

To rid his mind of these meaningless thoughts, he started walking at a faster pace down the forest path. He could feel his throat twitching and his fists quivering with his quickening breath.

As he stepped out of the forest and came to a stop in front of the gardener's cottage, he once again said, “Layla...”

In the same way that his canary flew to him when he whistled for it, Layla came running to him and held his hand. They spent the day together on a carefree stroll through the forest and along the riverside.

She giggled, played with him, and sometimes flirted with him. As she chatted with him about this and that, her singsong voice was clear and beautiful. Even though he hadn't clipped her wings or locked the door of her cage, his beautiful bird didn't try to escape.

*If our days together had been like this, would you still be here with me?* he wondered.

Another breeze blew in from the river, shaking the leaves of the forest trees again. As he walked along the margin between the forest and the river, he looked up at the bright, dazzling sky. It was too bright for him, so he closed his eyes. Even then it felt too bright, so he put his hand over his face. However, he didn't stop walking. He felt like he was being carried on by momentum, just like the

wheels of the overturned bicycle.

Summer arrived, and he got married, just as planned. He raised the veil, and the dreamily beautiful, green eyes of his bride gazed shyly back at him. Her cheeks were pink like fresh roses.

He called her name: “Layla...”

She smiled. Each of them could tell what the other was thinking simply by their smiles and the looks in their eyes.

He gradually slowed his walking pace and came to a stop. His hands were still covering his face. Riding on those ever-spinning bicycle wheels, he traveled even further into his imagination.

It was summer again. He and Layla were walking along the riverside after a delicious meal together. Now it was another summer. A cute, blonde-haired toddler was taking some halting steps in the shade of a large tree. When he made eye contact with her, she shouted, “Daddy!” and smiled excitedly. He smiled back at her and spread his arms out. She came running towards him and buried herself in his embrace. Layla smiled as she watched the father and daughter. Her smile looked just like the toddler's.

He wished that he could have had a life like that with Layla, if only it were possible.

After a long while, he lowered his hands from his face. His tears ran down the lines in his palms and dripped to the ground, leaving small, dark dots in the dry dirt.

He knew that ultimately none of what he had imagined was possible.

The sunlight passed between the tree branches and shone on his wet, red eyes. Silently laughing, he closed his eyes again.

Just as the wheels of the overturned bicycle had eventually stopped spinning, he couldn't keep imagining things like this forever. Soon even the breeze stopped, leaving him alone in silence by the river.

*“When you think about everything you've done to me, do you regret it? Even a little bit?”*

He felt like he could hear her faint voice asking him this question

again.

He couldn't give a different answer than he had given that day. “No,” he whispered. “No, Layla.”

He knew that, even if he were able to go back in time and do it all over again, nothing would have changed. As long as he was Duke Herhardt and she was Layla Llewellyn, their relationship would have started in the same way, as would his yearning for her. Even if he had known that she would have ended up running away from him, he still would have made exactly the same choices. Thus, he didn't regret anything having to do with her.

His hands stopped shaking. He buttoned the top button of his shirt again, tightened his tie, and adjusted the lapels of his jacket. The only remaining sign of his inner turmoil was the moisture in his eyes and eyelashes, which the sunlight soon dried. Soon his face was back to its usual, calm but tired expression.

He arrived back at the mansion just as the sun was starting to set. Hessen, who had been standing anxiously in the main hall, ran up to him, saying, “Your Grace!”

“Sorry I took so long,” Matthias calmly replied. “Has Count Klein arrived?”

“Yes, he's waiting for you in the third-floor office.” The duke strode up the stairs towards his study. He was more than thirty minutes late for the meeting. It was quite rude, but considering that Count Klein had once shown up an hour late for a meeting, he knew it wouldn't be the end of the world.

He soon arrived at the door of the small study that he used as an office. After putting on his Duke Herhardt face, he opened the door.

Nothing had changed. It had to be that way.

# Chapter 113:
## A Bird That Won't Sing

*One... two... three... four.*

Layla counted to herself as she walked. It was the first building on the fourth street after the bell tower in the town square. Still not used to this town, she could easily get lost if she didn't pay careful attention. Fortunately, she was able to find her way home in one try today. Holding a large, paper bag full of groceries with both arms, she plodded up the stairs.

Uncle Bill's relative had helped them find an apartment on the second floor of a building not far from the town square. It was smaller than the cottage back at Arvis had been, but it was much cleaner. Of course, it was going to take Uncle Bill quite a while to get used to a home without a yard or garden.

After putting away the groceries, she turned right around and went outside again. She went down a series of backstreets until she finally reached the glorious, beautiful seaside.

After spotting Uncle Bill walking a little way down the road from her, she quickened her pace and called out to him: "Uncle Bill!"

Earlier in the week, Bill had started working at a warehouse by the harbor.

"Why did you come all the way out here again?!" he asked. "You should've waited for me at home."

"I wanted to walk home with you, Uncle Bill. You're all done with work for the day, right?" she asked, smiling, as she checked her watch.

He smiled bashfully in response.

Smiling at each other like this, their faces looked as calm and serene as they had during their peaceful early days at Arvis. They both knew that things could never really go back to the way they had used to be, but this only made them strive harder not to acknowledge the fact. It was an unspoken rule that had arisen after

they had moved to this new place.

“I found a job, too,” she quietly said.

His eyes widened. “Already?”

“Remember the laboratory assistant position at the museum that Uncle Allen told me about? Well, I had my interview today, and they hired me on the spot! They said I can start tomorrow.”

“Look at you! I told you that you could make it no matter where you went.” Laughing, he patted her on the head.

The sunlight shimmered on her bangs as they fluttered in the salty sea breeze.

“But Layla, are you really going to start tomorrow? Isn't that a little soon? I think you should rest a while longer and get better first.”

“Do you really think anyone looking at me would say I look ill?”

“Well you haven't been eating well. If that's not an illness, what is it?”

Despite his blunt way of speaking, his eyes were filled with deep concern.

Ever since the move, Layla hadn't been eating well. Often she had no appetite at all. When she did manage to choke down even a small amount of food, she often threw it up afterwards. It was causing Bill a great deal of anxiety.

“I'm fine, Uncle Bill. I think working will be much better for me than staying at home. It'll help me adjust to life here faster, too.”

“I hope you're right about that...”

He sighed as he looked at her dramatically emaciated features. As much as he hated to see her in tears, if she were sobbing and moaning he could at least try to comfort her. The way she kept a smile plastered on her face while keeping her troubles bottled up inside made him feel even worse for her.

“U-uncle Bill! This is our place right here,” she shouted, grabbing Bill's arm as he started to walk past their building.

He glanced briefly over his shoulder, then casually kept walking. “I know.”

“Then where are you going?”

“It's hot out. Let's go get some ice cream.”

Knowing he didn't have much of a sweet tooth, Layla was a little taken aback, but she quickly grasped that he was suggesting it because he knew she liked it.

They walked to the town square and got an outdoor table at a café. Soon the server placed a bowl of vanilla ice cream in front of Layla, and a cold glass of beer in front of Bill.

“Better hurry up and eat that or it's going to melt, kiddo,” he said, chuckling, as he watched her stare blankly at her ice cream.

She flinched and looked up at him, then finally picked up her spoon.

“What's the matter? Have you lost your appetite again?” he asked.

“No, it's nothing like that, Uncle Bill,” she replied, shaking her head. She then quickly scooped up a big spoonful of ice cream and put it in her mouth. “It's so good!” she exclaimed, smiling brightly. She ate another spoonful, and then another, until she had finished the bowl. Keeping her eyes wide open, she looked up at the clear blue, summer sky. It would soon be summer in the beautiful, distant city to the north, as well.

* * *

The first crack in Matthias's orderly life emerged during the night. He wasn't sleeping well. As the days went by, his sleepless hours each night had increased, until he was barely sleeping at all. The deep fatigue was making his every movement feel laborious and difficult, as if his body were made of wet rags. He could no longer deny the fact that his mind was so foggy as to be almost incapable of sustaining focus on anything.

He got out of bed later than normal. He had already been dead tired the previous evening. After another sleepless night, his face was visibly gaunt. The weight loss had made his facial features sharper and more defined, giving him an even colder appearance

than usual.

He went into the bathroom and stared at his bloodshot eyes in the mirror. He looked ridiculously haggard, but he didn't snicker at himself like he had used to do. At some point this habit of his had stopped. He tried to remember how long this had been the case, but it was hard to recall. Rationally he knew it couldn't have been more than a few days, and yet it felt like the distant past.

He slowly ran his hands over his face, then turned away from the mirror. During his shower, his headache became even more severe.

After the shower, he put on a robe and stepped out of the bathroom, and soon heard a knock at the door.

“Your Grace, it's me, Hessen.”

“Come in,” he replied, sitting down on a chair next to the window.

He unconsciously shifted his gaze out the window, and saw the garden down below spotted with countless, brightly colored rosebuds. The spring sunlight shone radiantly on the road, as if to draw attention to the lack of a young woman hurrying off to work.

It was an ordinary morning. He read in the newspaper about all the tumultuous goings-on in the world, and he listened to Hessen telling him the day's schedule. He sipped hot coffee as he squinted in the bright sunlight. Then he heard another disappointing report on the status of the search.

“I'm sorry, Your Grace. We have still been unable to find any clues as to the gardener and Layla Llewellyn's whereabouts,” Hessen sorrowfully reported.

Matthias gave the same response he had given the day before, and the day before that: “Find them.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I'll give it my best,” Hessen replied, trying not to let the helplessness he was feeling show on his face.

Matthias nodded in response. His extreme fatigue was clearly visible.

Hessen had long since noticed that the duke's daily life was growing increasingly disordered. He had stayed silent about this up

to now, knowing that the duke would prefer it that way, but he no longer felt that he could stand by and watch his master waste away.

Having made up his mind, he said, “Your Grace, I'm going to have Dr. Ettman come here after he gets home from work.”

Matthias narrowed his eyes questioningly at him.

However, Hessen didn't back down. “You need to see a doctor, Your Grace. Please, just take it as a personal request from your aged butler.”

No matter how young and virile the duke was, no one could last forever without sleeping or eating properly. Perhaps sensing Hessen's concern, the duke yielded to his suggestion.

“Fine,” he softly replied, setting down the coffee cup he had been holding without taking a sip. “Go ahead and call him.”

* * *

The calm expression on Dr. Ettman's face as he entered the master suite soon gave way to a look of deep concern.

The duke was sitting on a chair in his bedroom, waiting for him. The duke's facial expression, bearing, and gestures as he greeted the doctor looked like the usual Duke Herhardt, but his face was noticeably gaunt. However, he still had his usual penetrating gaze, which gave him a strange air.

After the doctor concluded a brief examination, Matthias said, “Some sleeping pills should be enough.”

“But Your Grace, I think I should conduct a more thorough examination before-”

“There's nothing wrong with me other than a lack of sleep.”

“You seemed to have lost a lot of weight, too.”

“Once I get some rest, my appetite is sure to return as well.” The duke's tone was flat and unemotional, but his intention was clear.

Dr. Ettman was concerned, but he decided not to press the matter any further on the stubborn duke. It was clear at a glance that the duke wasn't sleeping well. Dr. Ettman would have preferred to pursue other forms of treatment before relying on medication, but

the most important thing for the duke right now was that he get some proper sleep, and in his current condition sleeping pills seemed like the only way.

*What could be going on with him?* Dr. Ettman wondered. He wasn't aware of anything in the duke's life that could be causing this sleeplessness. However, he decided not to dwell on the question, knowing that as a doctor his curiosity was not supposed to extend beyond what was strictly necessary for the care of his patient. Instead, he politely left. Hessen, who had been waiting quietly in the corner, followed him out.

Left alone in his room, Matthias flung his tired body onto the bed. He felt like he was submerged in a bottomless pool. He felt so tired that it seemed like he could fall into a deep sleep if he just closed his eyes. However, whenever he did close his eyes, his painfully tense mind only seemed to grow more restless.

By the time the courier arrived at the mansion with the bottle of sleeping pills Dr. Ettman had sent, the sun was already down.

Matthias, who had been lying awake on his bed, opened his eyes at the sound of Hessen knocking. It was dark in the unlit bedroom.

“I'll have your dinner sent to your bedroom,” Hessen said, placing the pill bottle on the bedside table.

Matthias shifted his gaze from the ceiling to the butler. “No. There's no need for that.”

“But, Your Grace...” Hessen trailed off, noticing that Matthias had closed his eyes. “Sleep well then, Your Grace.”

Matthias then heard the sound of the butler quietly leaving the room. He kept his eyes closed for a long while after that.

*Where was the line between sincerity and deceit with her?*

He had become fixated on this question ever since he had realized that she had deceived him. He was sure it hadn't all been a lie. It couldn't have been. Thus he felt he had to figure out what aspects of her behavior and bearing had been sincere. So far, however, he didn't have a clue.

Her lovely face, her bashful smile, and her warm touch. At times

it all had seemed sincere. At other times it had all seemed like a ruse.

He desperately racked his brain looking for an answer, believing that if he could simply determine a clear line between her sincere and deceitful behavior, the rest of his life would fall back into place. However, no matter how much he tried to figure it out, he always came up short. Giving up for the moment, he opened his eyes and sat up, leaning against the headboard of his bed.

Staring into the darkness, he tried whistling. However, his bird did not sing in response. The door of its cage was open, but it just remained hunched up in its nest. He tried whistling for it again and again, but there was still no response.

He turned his blank gaze to the bedside table, where the bottle of sleeping pills was sitting. His preference not to rely on such things was in direct conflict with his desperate yearning for sleep.

After a long deliberation, he swallowed one of the pills and flopped back down onto the bed. As soon as he did, a dry laugh escaped his lips. As the medicine gradually took effect, a feeling of relief spread through his body.

*Everything will be all right now,* he thought to himself. *If I can just get to sleep, and then wake up again, then everything will be all right.*

# Chapter 114:
## Where Everything Vanished

“What? Dr. Ettman has been seeing Matthias?” Elise von Herhardt asked, surprised to hear about the family doctor's recent visits to care for her son.

Feeling timid after Lady Herhardt's harsh tone, the young maid who had brought the news hesitated for a moment, then stammered, “Y-yes, ma'am. I heard he w-was here again today...”

The higher-ranking, middle-aged maid standing next to Lady and Dowager Herhardt made eye contact with the younger maid, and then glanced at the door. The younger maid took the hint at once and hurried out of the room. The older maid then left as well, leaving Elise and Katharina alone in the quiet drawing room.

“What could be wrong with him? He rarely ever got sick as a child...” Elise said, looking worriedly at Katharina.

Katharina returned her look of concern.

Bill and Layla's sudden flight from Arvis had brought shock and confusion to most of the residents of Arvis, but for Elise and Katharina, it had instead come as something of a relief. As unfortunate as the disappearance was, it had taken care of the pesky issue of Matthias's relationship with Layla. Fortunately, Matthias himself didn't seem especially distraught over it, either.

*Sure, it was just a brief deviation from the norm,* Katharina thought.

With that problem out of the way, they could focus all their attention on the fast-approaching wedding. They had noticed that Matthias was looking a little gaunt, but they had chalked this up to him being busy wrapping up loose ends with the family business so that he and Claudine could have a long, peaceful honeymoon together.

“You don't think it's because of Layla, do you?” Elise asked.

“Come now, Elise, there's no way,” Katharina replied in a cold tone of voice. “I'm sure he's just a little worn out from overwork.

He'll be fine once he gets some rest."

"You're probably right."

"Of course I am. I'll have Dr. Ettman pay us a visit later and we can have him give us a full report on Matthias's condition. Stop your needless worrying."

The more Elise's face darkened with concern, the more assertive Katharina's voice became.

Ultimately, Elise gave in and nodded at her mother-in-law, while internally wondering, *Were Matthias's feelings for Layla deeper than I thought? Maybe so. Young love is often the most passionate. But this isn't just anyone; it's Matthias.*

Matthias's aloof, unemotional demeanor had won him praise, as such qualities were highly valued in aristocratic society. Elise had always assumed that his behavior reflected his true personality, even though she had occasionally witnessed troubling signs that this wasn't the case. The two previous dukes, Matthias's father and grandfather, had not been particularly warm or friendly men at all. Perhaps Matthias was different from them in this respect.

However, he had been too well-behaved as a child for this to cause her much concern. He was the House of Herhardt's masterpiece. There was no better way to describe him. She believed herself to have given birth to the living embodiment of the family's glory and prestige. This made the strange feeling of distance that she sensed from him easy enough for her to understand. Could that Matthias, her son, really be falling apart over a lowly orphan girl?

She laughed at herself for her pathetic worries, thinking, *I really mustn't let my imagination run wild like that.*

* * *

Matthias slowly opened his eyes, then remained lying for a long while, staring into space. The curtains were drawn, so it was dark in his room. Considering that he had fallen asleep just as the sun was starting to rise, however, he was fairly sure that morning had already passed.

Ever since he had started taking sleeping pills, his sense of time had gotten fuzzy. Anytime he couldn't get to sleep, he would pop a pill, whether it was the early evening, or late at night. Sometimes he took them in the middle of the day.

Sleep had become a place of refuge for him. While he was immersed in medicated slumber, he wasn't tormented by memories of Layla. Of course, however, these memories came flooding back as soon as he awoke.

He no longer liked doing anything but sleeping. The family doctor had irritatingly started paying him regular visits, even though he didn't recall requesting this.

On his visit the previous day, Dr. Ettman had warned that he would be forced to discontinue his prescription for the sleeping pills if the duke kept abusing them. Matthias had simply chuckled briefly in response. He knew the doctor wasn't the type to give such a warning lightly, and might very well cut off his prescription. But he also knew that as Duke Herhardt, he could obtain anything he wanted. If Dr. Ettman stopped prescribing the sleeping pills, he could just get another doctor to prescribe them for him.

Moving very slowly, he got out of bed. After drinking a glass of water and taking a shower, he looked at the clock and saw that it was already past noon. He tried to recall his schedule for the day, but nothing came to mind, so he rang the service bell to summon the butler and started to get dressed.

Just as he was buttoning the last button of his shirt, Hessen arrived.

“I'll have your lunch brought up, Your Grace.”

“No need. Coffee will be enough for me.”

“But Your Grace, I-”

“What does my afternoon look like?” As Matthias asked this, cutting the butler off, he walked over to the window and opened the curtains. There were dark clouds covering the sky. The whole world looked gray. He opened the window, and a humid breeze blew in, full of the sweet scent of flowers.

“You don't have anything scheduled for the afternoon,” Hessen replied. “You should just get some rest.”

“I see.”

“You have to eat, Your Grace. Or would you like me to call Dr. Ettman?”

Hessen was being more persistent than usual.

Brushing back his still-wet hair, Matthias turned to face him. The aged butler normally showed no emotion, but now he was staring at the duke with eyes full of worry.

*Do I look that bad?*

He was too tired to dwell on the question. He felt like going back to sleep, and only waking up again once all these distractions had vanished. That was all he wanted. He didn't want food, he didn't want to see the doctor, he just wanted to sleep.

After taking a sip of the coffee that Hessen had brought for him, he walked over to the unusually quiet birdcage. His canary, which had used to excitedly hop and fly all around the room, had lately been staying hunched up in the nest within its cage.

He reached into the cage and carefully retrieved the limp, quivering bird. Viewed up close, it was clearly sick. Its feathers had lost their beautiful luster, and now looked rough and unkempt.

It pained him to look at the state the bird was in and remember how it had used to bathe and preen itself several times a day. Just then, the canary started rubbing its beak and body against his hand, as if it was trying to absorb his body heat.

Wrapping both his hands around it to keep it warm, he sat staring blankly for a long time, while memories of that day cycled through his mind.

*“I want you to love me.”*

She had smiled at him like a witch putting a curse on him that day.

*“I would like it so much if you loved me.”*

Those sweet words were the dagger she had driven into his heart that late afternoon.

*“I want you to love me deeply. Forever and ever.”*

*My ever so beautiful, ever so cruel Layla...*

Carefully placing the bird back in its nest, he said, “Have the bird-keeper take a look at this.” His voice was hoarse with agitation.

“Pardon? Ah... Yes, Your Grace, I will,” Hessen replied.

Matthias then turned and went out the door. Hessen hurried behind him, saying, “If you're going on an outing, I should let Evers know-”

“I'm just going for a walk. I don't need my assistant.”

Matthias came to a stop again at the window in the hallway.

Hessen hesitated for a moment, then took his leave and walked away. Only then did Matthias continue striding down the hallway. By the time he had exited the mansion and entered the garden, dark rain clouds were covering the sky, but he didn't care.

He walked and walked. He didn't know where he was headed, but it didn't matter anyway.

After the days when he had snickered at Layla's cute behavior had passed, he had been flooded with wild feelings of anger. Looking back on it, he was shocked that he had been deceived by such a terrible actress. He had been blinded by lust. His anger and self-loathing grew until they felt like they were going to swallow him up. But now, even they seemed to have vanished. He would have preferred to feel some anger, rather than the frigid, still feeling in his chest.

*Is it all over, then?*

As he asked himself this, he arrived at the river. Just like the dark sky, the water was murky. Not wanting to stop, he walked along the riverside, following its current.

*If it's all over, then there's no reason to find her, is there?* he asked himself.

Perhaps it was for the best. His beautiful misfortune had vanished. This had caused him some mild distress, but now that distress had vanished as well, and he could finally return to his

stable life as Duke Herhardt.

Yes, it would be easy, like everything in his life ultimately was.

As he was snickering at this thought, he saw a bird fly up from the riverbank ahead of him. Glancing indifferently at it at first, he quickly noticed that it had a red string tied to one of its legs. It was a migratory bird that Layla had been tracking.

*It came back,* he thought. He could feel his heart beating faster. *The bird you were waiting for came back, Layla.* Soon his heart was pounding so hard, he felt like it was making his whole body shake. *So you have to come back too, Layla.*

Suddenly he felt like Layla really might return, or perhaps that she was already back. A twisted grin appeared on his face. He knew that he was passing into delusion, but he couldn't stop. The next thing he knew, he was running down the forest path.

As a gentle spring rain started to fall, he emerged from the forest and saw the gardener's cottage.

White sheets fluttered on the clothesline. The cottage's windows glowed warmly from within. Wearing an apron, Layla came running out through the open front door. As she hurriedly gathered the laundry to save it from the rain, her French braid bobbed up and down.

*Look at that. She came back.*

He started laughing wildly. *So this is what I've become,* he thought, realizing that his mental disturbance over the past few weeks had been more serious than he had thought. Shortly after his breathless laughter burst forth, however, all his hallucinations vanished. Looking around, he realized that he was all alone in the cottage's empty front yard, surrounded only by weeds and overgrown grass. He remained standing there for a while, letting the rain fall on him.

This was his first time visiting the cottage since Layla had run away. He hadn't wanted to face the fact that she was truly gone. As long as he didn't check, he could maintain the delusion that she was still there.

Instead of turning back, he started trudging towards the cottage.

He didn't know why. He felt simultaneous, conflicting urges both to give up and to hold onto the last thread of his lingering attachment. Right now, however, he just felt the urge to keep walking.

The shallow steps to the porch creaked as he walked up them and extended his rain-soaked hand to the doorknob. He tried turning it. It was unlocked.

Standing in front of the open door, he briefly closed and opened his eyes, then stepped across the threshold.

# Chapter 115:
## What's Left?

Everything looked the same inside, other than a layer of dust. Matthias chuckled to himself as he saw that they truly seemed to have left everything behind when they ran away. It was a remarkable sight, knowing as he did how much the gardener and Layla had loved the little cottage.

He stood in the same spot, looking around, until the water dripping from his rain-soaked clothes had made a dark spot on the dusty floorboards beneath him. The rain was pounding against the roof and windowpanes, but his heavy breathing was even louder in his ears.

Once he had caught his breath, he slowly walked to Layla's room. It also looked just like he remembered it. It was as if she might return at any moment.

He turned on the lamp next to the bed, and a dim light suffused the room. It almost felt like, if he were to call out her name, she would appear. He imagined her running into the room and staring intently at him with her expressive green eyes. He imagined her smiling, and whispering, *"I want you to love me,"* just like she had whispered to him on that beautiful evening.

He stood there with perfect posture, as always. His face also looked the same as usual—his eyes were calm with slightly lowered lids, and his mouth was gently closed. However, his perfect habits, which had always been like a suit of armor to him, were now showing cracks and holes here and there.

He had frequently been having trouble focusing his eyes. His breathing was often irregular, and he occasionally found himself unconsciously clenching his fists so tightly that they started trembling. He took another deep breath to clear his mind of these thoughts.

He took a few steps forward, and his foot bumped into a large,

wooden box protruding halfway out from under the bed. He immediately forgot what he had been about to do and stooped down to slide the box out from the bed. As he did this, the box's lid fell off, revealing countless odds and ends within.

He ran his eyes indifferently over the items, until he noticed a familiar-looking jewelry box. It was the gift he had given her. He sat on the foot of the bed and opened the velvet box. Inside was the beautiful, shimmering crystal bird. As he took in its delicate, intricate beauty, he could see Layla back on that spring day in Ratse, when she had run down the museum passageway, crying out in childlike excitement. He recalled her reaching out to try to touch the bird ornaments hanging overhead. They had been too high for her to reach, but then he had lifted her up. As if she had gained the power of flight, she had been suddenly able to reach the birds.

*Layla... My Layla... Were you ever really mine...?*

He snapped the velvet box shut and put it back in the box of odds and ends, and then shifted his gaze to a corner of the room, where he saw the shoes he had bought her, sitting there, neglected. She had left behind everything he had given her, even those shoes. He wanted to smile, but his lips wouldn't budge. His anger had turned into disillusion, and now even that had gone away.

*Then what's left?* he silently wondered.

He looked around the room again. As he turned his head this way and that, droplets of rain fell from his hair onto the bedsheets and floor.

*She must have left some clue behind. This can't be the end.*

Unsure what to do, he ran his hand over his face, then stood up and started searching every corner of the tiny room, looking for traces of her. He searched through her closet, her desk, all her drawers, anywhere he could find. Just about everything seemed to have been left as it was, which made him feel even more anxious.

After finishing this frantic search, he stood in the center of the room, panting. The sound of the rain outside had grown even louder. Just then, he glanced down, and noticed a notebook by his

foot. Its pages were open, and there appeared to be a child's handwriting inside.

He reached down and picked it up with his cold hand. It was Layla's diary from when she was young.

He was about to put it down again, and then he changed his mind, and began to read it. It started the day she first arrived at Arvis.

*I came to Arvis today. I met Uncle Bill! He is very, very tall and looks scary, but really he is not scary at all. He doesn't yell at me or hit me. He gave me dinner. He said that I need to eat a lot of food, like a cow. So I did eat a lot, and he didn't get mad at me. The food was so good!*

*I like Uncle Bill. And Arvis is really pretty. Before coming here, I wished that I could live with Uncle Bill instead of going to an orphanage. I promised that I would be a really good girl if I did. I hope that my wish comes true!*

On the back of the page of that first entry were a few flattened, dried herbs and wildflowers, as well as a few clumsy drawings of Arvis's forest, flowers, and birds.

He slowly flipped through the yellowed pages of the diary, before another entry caught his eye.

*I saw the duke. He is back from school. I was up in a tree, and he almost shot me with his gun! I was so scared! I cried! But the duke is really handsome. And his voice is really smooth, like the duck feather I picked up by the river. I asked Uncle Bill if all noblemen are handsome, but he said no. I guess the duke is especially handsome. I don't know why someone so handsome would do bad things.*

Matthias's heart sank as the diary entry reminded him of their first encounter. He recalled seeing what he thought was a bird up in a tree by the river, and almost shooting it before realizing that it was a little girl. This encounter had always stood out in his memory, perhaps because of the shock of having almost killed someone.

After that encounter, he had seen her from time to time on his hunting grounds. Sometimes guests to Arvis who found children cute, like Riette, would greet her. Usually she would quickly nod her head and then run away. She had seemed especially afraid of Matthias himself.

Holding the diary, he sat back down on the bed. He wasn't sure what he was doing, but he didn't want to stop.

In her diary entries, Layla seemed to find joy in every little thing. She rejoiced whenever she learned the name of a new species of flower or bird. She got excited whenever her uncle Bill praised her. She was happy whenever the weather was nice. She seemed ecstatic after the first time she tasted ice cream. Amid all these cheerful entries, he suddenly came upon a sad one. As he read the entry, he realized that he remembered this day as well.

*Today the duke's cousin invited me to come to the mansion. She wanted me to play with her, but I didn't know any of the games she wanted to play. She said I was no better than a puppy and then she left. I know how to do a lot of things! But I didn't tell her. I don't think she would like climbing trees or running around.*

*All I did was sit there, but then her maid gave me a gold coin! I didn't want to take it, but she said I had to. I was embarrassed, so I took it and ran away. Then I tripped and fell down and I dropped the coin. And then the scary, handsome duke stepped on it! I felt really sad about having to pick up the coin in front of the duke.*

*But I'm not going to be sad anymore. Uncle Bill said I earned the coin and I should be proud of it. He said that if I kept working hard, I would grow up to be an outstanding adult.*

*It's really weird. Everyone else always called me a stupid orphan. When I lived with my aunt, her kids said I would live on the streets and then become a hooker. I didn't know what a hooker was, but later I found out and I got so upset that I got in a fight with the cousin who first said it to me. But he was bigger than me so I got hurt more than he did. But then my uncle only got mad at me, and he hit me and said that I had to go*

*for a day without food. I got so hungry that I picked a turnip from the garden and ate it, but then I got caught. My uncle said that I was nothing more than a thieving rat. Everyone else said that too.*

*But Uncle Bill is so different. He said that I will become an outstanding adult. It feels weird, but maybe he's right. Uncle Bill is really smart so maybe I really will be an outstanding adult. I was so happy when he said that! I could barely sleep. I felt like my heart was twinkling like a beautiful star. I have to become an outstanding adult. That way I can make Uncle Bill happy. When he is happy, he laughs really loud. I love the sound of him laughing.*

Matthias stopped reading, not wanting to turn to the next page.

He didn't know why he had stepped on the coin she had dropped that day. He had never taken part in that sort of playful provocation before, but for some reason he had been drawn to act that way with her that day.

Had he been irritated at her for hiding in the tree and almost making him shoot her? That might have been the case, but it was so long ago, his memories were hazy. All he could recall is having the urge to step on the coin. Looking at that small, skinny girl with her big, green eyes, he had just felt having fun with her.

* * *

Matthias stayed in the small room in the abandoned cottage until well after it had gotten dark.

Having written long, heartfelt diary entries when she was young, as Layla grew up, her entries grew shorter and more objective—the names of flowers and birds she had discovered in Arvis's forest; her plans to improve her grades at school or learn to ride a bicycle; her carefully planned living expenses. She mainly wrote about her time together with Bill or Kyle, but occasionally unfamiliar names would pop up as well. Mostly these were the names of other Arvis employees.

He found a few more notebooks and placed them on the bed. They contained an account of her life from the time she was a poor

orphan girl being passed from home to home, to when she traveled alone to a foreign country and became a part of her uncle Bill's family, and her childhood and adolescent years growing up at Arvis. The entries in the latest diary suddenly cut off during the previous winter, just as the end of the year was approaching. Just around the time when Matthias had finally gained possession of the thing he had most wanted to possess—Layla herself, his beautiful bird.

He searched through all her books and all the boxes in her room, but she hadn't left a single record of anything from after that point. She had just disappeared.

To him, those days had been the most wonderful, radiant time of his life. To her, however, they had been the end of her life's beauty.

He accepted that without any anger or disappointment. He felt like he had become a spectator of his own life. Everything irritated him now. He didn't care how anything turned out. If he had been in his own bedroom, he would have reached over to the bedside table and taken a sleeping pill to knock himself out.

He switched off the lamp and left the cottage, then started strolling back to the mansion, looking just as carefree as he had been on his way to the cottage, completely ignoring the rain that was still pouring down on him.

“Y-your Grace!”

The servants were all astir at the sight of their master soaked from head to toe, but he paid them no mind and just kept walking.

He couldn't make out anything they were saying; their voices were like a distant buzzing in his ear.

Just as he was about to reach his bedroom, he was finally brought to a stop by the sight of Hessen, who had a solemn look on his face. Behind him was a young maid who was sniffling, with a frightened look on her face. She was the maid who had been assigned to look after the canary.

Without saying anything, Matthias looked at Hessen, waiting for an explanation. The butler cleared his throat and hesitantly said, “Your bird, Your Grace...” His voice was shaking feebly.

The maid's sniffles and whimpers grew louder.

With an uncharacteristically sad expression on his face, Hessen continued. “Unfortunately, Your Grace... your bird has died.”

# Chapter 116:
## Layla

The rain finally stopped as dawn was breaking. Matthias sat in front of the window on the west side of his bedroom and gazed at the sunrise. The window was slightly open, and a breeze full of the fresh scent of roses wafted in. It seemed that the roses had bloomed during the rain.

Rose season had thus truly arrived, but Layla had not. And now his bird was gone as well. He turned and looked at the empty birdcage. The food and water dishes were still full, and there were bright-yellow feathers here and there. The only thing missing was the bird itself.

He turned to face the table in front of him again. There was a wooden box, inside of which the cold, stiff canary was lying in eternal rest.

In his mind, he reminisced about all the time he and the bird had spent together. That pretty little bird had won his heart at first sight. At first it had been skittish, shrieking in alarm and trying to escape from him. Over time, however, it had become tamer and even started showing affection towards him. From then on, he had felt that the canary truly belonged to him. Its singing had brought him a great deal of joy. He had also enjoyed the sight of it chirping and fluttering around, and the feeling of its soft feathers when it would perch on the back of his hand and stare at him. All of that felt meaningless now.

He rose from his chair, walked up to the table, and gently stroked the canary's cold, lifeless body with the back of his fingers. The golden feathers of its wings still felt so soft, it seemed like the bird might at any moment suddenly open its eyes and fly up onto his shoulder.

The bird's cause of death was unknown. It had grown increasingly ill, and then disappeared from his life forever. Just like

Layla had.

He remained there at the table for a long time, as if waiting for the dead bird to sing. As the clouds cleared away, and a bright ray of morning sunlight began to shine on the box, he whispered the bird's name: “Layla...”

The moment he had first laid eyes on the canary, he had chosen the name Layla for it. He didn't care if it sounded ridiculous. He could be as sweet as he wanted with the bird, and it loved him in return. He liked the feeling.

He whispered the sweet name a few more times, but the cold bird's eyes remained closed.

It was the start of a day without song.

* * *

Layla awoke in the middle of the night, feeling very sick. She had already had a slight fever, but now her whole body was aching. After barely eating anything for days, she was sapped of energy, but she still had no appetite. Shivering, she pulled the covers up over her head. The days were all right, but the nights were hard to endure.

*Is this all because of him?* she wondered. She didn't want to spend another moment dwelling on the nightmarish memories of her time with the duke, so she closed her eyes tightly had clutched the ends of her pillow. No matter how hard she tried, however, she was powerless to stop her thoughts.

Eventually she gave up, got out of bed, and walked over to the window. The stars twinkling in the summer sky filled her unfocused eyes.

*Has my wish come true?* she asked the cruel God above.

* * *

Amid the silence of half-sleep, Matthias heard a familiar voice as if in the distance.

“Your Grace…”

Sounding closer now, the voice continued.

“You'd better wake up now, Your Grace.”

Without moving his body at all, he opened his eyes. As his eyes regained their focus, he saw his assistant standing sheepishly at the foot of his bed.

“I'm sorry for entering your bedroom unbidden, Your Grace,” Mark said, lowering his head, “but there's not much time left until your meeting today, and as you know it's quite an important one, so...”

“Of course,” Matthias casually replied, not at all sounding like someone who had just awoken from sleep. As he sat up and leaned against the headboard, some maids stepped forward and opened the curtains, letting in a flood of dazzling sunshine.

Showing no surprise at the fact that it was already past one o'clock, Matthias casually got out of bed. He was fully accustomed to his new, unusual daily routine.

He stood for a while in the sunshine, staring blankly. The servants had exited, leaving the bedroom as quiet as a mouse. Irritated by the silence, he whistled for a moment, and then chuckled to himself.

*Oh, that's right. Layla's gone.*

He glanced at the empty spot from which the birdcage had been taken away.

*She's dead.*

He calmly accepted the fact that his bird had died, as if it were just another mundane fact, like the fact that it was sunny outside.

He then started getting dressed. It was only after he had finished tying his necktie that he tried to recall what the meeting his assistant had mentioned was about. *I know it's a meeting with the board members... What is the question at issue again? Probably just another opportunity for the board members to argue with each other about how bad things are getting on the international stage.*

Without even glancing in the mirror to see how he looked, he stepped out of his dressing room. He had noticed recently that his

clothes had been feeling a little loose, but he hadn't paid it much mind. He was sure that his weight loss was just a temporary thing. As far as he was concerned, it would have been a ridiculous overreaction to have his outfits re-tailored. He had decided not to take any such drastic measures.

When he reached the main hall on the first floor, his mother smiled awkwardly at him. “Looks like you're heading out, Matthias?”

There was no reason for her to be hanging around in this part of the mansion, so he figured that she had been waiting for him.

“Yes, Mother.”

“Is it company business?”

“Yes, there's a meeting with the board of directors.” He smiled with his usual poise.

Taken aback by the contrast between her son's sickly appearance and his cool, composed attitude, Elise said no more.

Matthias bowed politely and left the main hall. As soon as he stepped outside, he was showered with summery sunlight. *How long has it been since Layla ran away?* he wondered. He tried to figure it out for a moment, then he gave up. *When's the wedding? Is it next month?* Even his upcoming wedding felt like something from another world.

Mark Evers watched him staring blankly up at the sky for a while before growing concerned and walking up to him. “Your Grace...?”

Matthias slowly raised his hand to stop Mark from saying anything more, then got into the car. The documents that Mark had prepared for the meeting were sitting neatly on the seat next to Matthias. As he started to peruse them, the car took off.

It was hard to stay focused, but he tried his hardest to read through every document in the stack. This was part of his duty as head of the family business. Throughout all the years of his life, he had never failed to fulfill this duty, and he wouldn't let today be an exception. Sure enough, he made it through the stack of documents just as the car was coming to a stop in front of the company's

building downtown.

The chauffeur hurriedly got out of the car and opened the back passenger door.

Matthias nonchalantly stepped out and walked into the building. Once in the boardroom, he greeted the directors and took his seat at the table. As he had expected, the meeting was heated from the start. It was as if the boardroom was going to be reduced to ashes before any international battles began.

They had to decide on a singular path forward before the meeting concluded. Matthias was well aware of this, and he was well aware that the responsibility for this decision fell primarily to him.

Trying to ignore the slight headache he was feeling, he concentrated on the documents laid out in front of him. However, the complicated numbers and figures looked like a foreign language. Soon, he wasn't even sure what he was looking at anymore. And then, he felt like he was surrounded by distracting sounds that he knew couldn't be real. He heard the sound of the overturned bicycle's wheels spinning. He heard the sound of the leaves rustling in the breeze, and the sound of his racing heartbeat.

He extended his bony, emaciated hand and grasped the water glass in front of him. However, the more he tried to rid his mind of the sounds he was imagining, the louder they became, pulling him deeper and deeper into his memories until he saw Layla on the ground ahead of him, next to the bicycle from which she had just fallen.

He started walking towards her. With each step he took, his heart beat a little faster. Once he was close enough to smell the rosy scent of her body, he felt suddenly very thirsty and his lips felt dry. However, these sensations soon went away. As Layla, lying in his shadow, looked up at him, everything else disappeared, leaving only the two of them.

He was overwhelmed by the sight of the young woman on the ground in front of him, wearing her dirt-covered school uniform. He felt humbled by her presence, even though he was the one looking

down at her.

He was now able to identify the strange emotion he had felt that day. He was also aware that he had felt this emotion every time he was with Layla, despite his best efforts to stifle it. And he was feeling it right now. She made him feel utterly weak and insignificant.

“Um... Your Grace?”

He raised his head at the sound someone calling his name, but he was no longer able to concentrate on anything. He felt the urge to say whatever necessary to get out of there, so that he could return home and take a sleeping pill. He didn't want to worry about anything else. The entire world could disappear and he wouldn't care. It was a wild thought, but it was how he felt.

Gazing around the dreamlike boardroom, he mustered the last of his rationality to say, “My apologies, gentlemen. In my current state, it will be hard for me to render proper judgment.”

“Wh-what do you m-”

“The House of Herhardt will accept whatever decision the board of directors comes to after an adequate discussion.” He raised his deep-blue eyes and looked at Mr. Haussen, one of the company's executive directors. “Mr. Haussen can act as moderator.”

Not only had Mr. Haussen played a substantial role in the management of the company since the time when Matthias's father had been head of the company, but he had also acted as Matthias's mentor when he took over control of the company.

The boardroom, which a moment earlier had been loud and clamorous, was instantly reduced to chilly silence.

They had already heard rumors that Duke Herhardt was in poor health, but they hadn't imagined that it was to this extent.

As the board members started to murmur to one another, the duke rose from his seat and said, “Once again, my sincere apologies.” He then scrutinized the faces of everyone present, standing with a dignified bearing wholly unlike a man who was abnegating his duty. However, there was a strange emotion in his

eyes. It was as if he was being consumed by a cold fire, or that he himself had become such a fire.

He left the boardroom. He tried to button his jacket, but his hands felt numb, so he gave up and took off the jacket entirely. He then yanked off his necktie and stuffed it in a pocket of the jacket.

Mark Evers hurried up to him, but Matthias cut him off before he could say anything, saying in a hoarse voice, “I don't need you right now.”

Taken aback, Mark hesitated, while Matthias walked through the building's huge lobby and down the marble stairs.

Once outside, he started staggering through the dazzlingly bright sunlight.

# Chapter 117:
## Forever Ignorant

News that Kyle Ettman had returned to Karlsbar spread quickly through Arvis, sending its residents into confusion once again. By now, most believed the rumor that Kyle had helped the gardener and Layla escape. They thought that he had only broken off the engagement because his mother had opposed the marriage, but that his feelings for Layla remained just as strong as ever.

Some were skeptical, but most had believed it to be true. It would have been the happiest possible conclusion to Layla's story. However, this hope was quashed by the sight of Kyle wandering around Arvis, looking for Layla.

As soon as Chef Mona heard that he had come to Arvis, she ran outside and shouted at him, “Hey, Kyle!” When he turned to face her, she continued. “Even you don't know where Layla and Bill are? I can't believe it!”

He said nothing in response, but it wasn’t hard for Mona to guess the meaning of his silence.

When he had shown up in Karlsbar the previous morning, his father had told him to go back to college at once, but he had defied him, saying that he was determined to find Layla.

“I'm sorry, Chef Mona...” he finally replied.

“Sorry?! Don't say that. Ugh, I'm the one who should be sorry. I shouldn't have spoken so carelessly.” She rubbed her eyes, which had started to tear up.

Kyle excused himself, and then frantically ran across the garden. As he entered the forest, he felt a vague hope that if he went to the cottage, he would be reunited with Layla and Bill. However, as he emerged from the forest, he was hit with a rude awakening.

“Layla…?”

When he saw the cottage's weedy, overgrown front yard, his heart sank. After thoroughly checking out the cottage’s exterior and

even looking around inside, he felt like his legs were going to give out under him.

“Layla! Layla! Layla!”

Some startled birds fled at the sound of his screaming, but Layla was nowhere to be found.

* * *

Matthias wandered aimlessly. He knew it was ridiculous for him to have left the board meeting with such confidence when he had nowhere in mind to go. Nonetheless, he couldn't stop.

As he plodded down the road, he felt like he was floating, perhaps because of the sleeping pills that he had been taking every day. He had a splitting headache, and his whole body was in pain from the fever. However, this only made him want to keep moving forward.

The pain made everything else bearable. If the pain were to go away, he felt like his memories of Layla would swallow him up. This filled him with a sense of dread unlike anything he had experienced before.

*So come back, Layla.*

He sighed and chuckled at the same time.

*You worked so hard to transform me into the miserable being I've become, so wouldn't you at least like to come appreciate your handiwork? Come back. Come back and laugh at me. Come see the man you destroyed. You'll enjoy it. Smile at me once more as my queen. Please, just come back, please...*

Gritting his teeth, he picked up his pace. Soon he was on the road that led to Arvis. When he turned the corner onto Platanus Road, he saw the quiet spot where he had last seen Layla.

Despite his staggering gait, he kept moving steadily forward until he reached the spot where he and Layla had faced each other for the last time. Once again, he felt like he could hear the sounds he had heard that day. They were like music to his ears.

Panting, he lowered his bloodshot eyes and looked at his shadow.

Layla wasn't there. She had disappeared, and it now seemed that she would never return. As he finally accepted that fact, he found himself bursting into laughter. He felt like crying, but all that came out was laughter.

After passing through Arvis's gates, he once again headed towards the cottage where Layla had lived.

After their tense first encounter, he had seen her occasionally while he was in the forest hunting. Each time, she had acted frightened and had hidden or run away from him.

Irritated by this, he had once spurred his horse so that he could block her path and prevent her from getting away. For a moment, she had stood frozen with fear, and then had scampered off the path into the forest weeds, tripping and falling over at one point but then getting up immediately and continuing to run away.

Once she was sure that Matthias wasn't chasing after her, she had returned to the path, and then looked over her shoulder at him. Despite the great distance between them, he could sense that she was glaring at him.

As he chuckled at this, she had started walking briskly back towards the cottage, kicking sticks and stones in her path to vent her anger.

He had found this amusing, so he had continued to tease her like this occasionally. He had stopped this after she had undergone a sudden growth spurt and no had longer looked like a little girl. After that, he had thoroughly ignored her, until the summer day when he had encountered her and seen that she was now a fully grown woman.

Thus, it couldn't be said that he had fallen in love with her at first sight. It was hard to pinpoint exactly when it had happened.

Maybe there wasn't a precise point in time. Just as she had gradually grown up, his feelings had gradually evolved as well. The little girl whom he had enjoyed picking on had grown into a young maiden who had gotten on his nerves. And then that young maiden had grown into a beautiful woman who had dominated him fully.

If he didn't know when his love for her had begun, he certainly didn't know when it would end.

*So what am I supposed to do without you here, Layla*?

He looked around with wary eyes. He was surrounded by memories of Layla. All of those countless memories felt wonderful and precious to him. And yet, as he traced over them in his mind, he chuckled again.

She had constantly tried to get away from him, and had cried in fear when she hadn't been able to. If the whole idea of them becoming lovers was just a ruse she had devised in order to exact her revenge on him, then that meant that she had never really been his. Her tears and suffering were the only sincere thing he had ever witnessed from her. This made him feel unbearably miserable and empty, and yet he couldn't let go.

He couldn't stand the fact that such a lowly, insignificant woman had shaken his life to the core. This was why he had tormented her. When he made her cry, he felt relief, as if her tears were confirmation that his life was safe. However, he had never for a moment wished that she would disappear.

Looking back on it now, he felt ridiculous. If she had bothered him so, why hadn't he just gotten rid of her? He had never once considered doing that. He wanted her to stay, crying by his side. Forever, as his Layla.

After wandering around aimlessly for a while, his gaze came to an abrupt stop at the end of the forest path. The man who had stopped there was staring back at him.

It was the man who Layla loved—Kyle Ettman.

* * *

Kyle remained calm. It was strange. He had thought that he would have been ready to kill the duke on sight, but now that he was actually looking at him in the flesh, he felt no violent urges, but only cold disdain.

He slowly started walking one step at a time towards Matthias.

Suddenly he remembered Layla with a tear-covered face saying, *"I love him."*

He knew she wanted him to believe that it was just a lie she had told to protect him, but he had seen through that. When he had gone to the cottage and seen the two of them together, he had known at once that she really was in love with the duke. Otherwise, there was nothing the duke could have done to make her accept his affections. She would have rather died. That was who she was.

*"I love him."*

It was for that reason that those words had caused a deep pain in his heart that had never gone away.

For all he knew, even she hadn't realized that she was telling the truth. The duke likely hadn't realized this either. But Kyle had. Only Kyle had known. And yet, he had lost Layla, while the duke had been able to hold on to her, without knowing what he had. And then, the duke had brought so much pain upon the woman who loved him, he had ended up losing her as well. It was truly ridiculous.

Kyle unclenched his fists and started striding forward. Once he was close enough to make out the duke's face, he stopped, surprised. The duke looked too composed to be drunk, and yet he didn't look like himself at all.

"Considering that you ruined Layla's life, you look surprisingly joyful, Your Grace," Kyle said, using sarcasm to suppress his anger.

*Is he feeling regret? If so, that's all the more detestable.*

"Or are you feeling lighthearted after making Layla disappear so that she wouldn't mar your perfect life?"

"Sounds like even you don't know," the duke quietly said. His face remained expressionless. "Even you, Kyle Ettman, don't know where Layla disappeared off to?" He then smiled.

The sudden shift in the duke's facial expression sent a chill down Kyle's spine. Just a moment earlier, the duke had been staring blankly like a sick person, and now he was grinning cheerfully.

"You sick bastard," Kyle said, gritting his teeth.

However, the duke just kept smiling. It seemed to mean nothing to him that he had made Layla so miserable that she had abandoned her whole life just to escape from him. He was just happy to learn that she hadn't gone to Kyle. As if he was still ready to use whatever means necessary to get her back.

“Have you ever once for a moment looked at Layla as a human being?” Kyle asked, staring coldly at the duke. “Not a mere object of your desire, but a real human being? A human being with thoughts and emotions and dreams, who tried so hard to make a good life for herself?!”

The duke's smile vanished and he stared intently at Kyle with his chillingly cold blue eyes.

*How did I expect him to react?* Kyle asked himself. He took a deep breath to stop himself from bursting into tears. The more he held back his tears, the stronger the hate he felt for the duke.

“How could you treat her the way you did?” he shouted. “She...” Rather than finishing the sentence, he just sighed, thinking, *She loved you.*

He thought back to when he had pleaded with her, saying, *“Are you still not going to stop? He's going to ruin your life, Layla.”*

*“I know, Kyle,”* she had replied.

He remembered seeing the tears from her eyes after she lowered her head in shame.

*“I know.”*

Even with full knowledge of how bad the duke was for her, she had foolishly continued her relationship with him.

“You don't have the right to look for Layla. You should go back to your perfect life and leave well enough alone,” he said, looking at the duke with contempt. “When's your wedding? Next month? I wish you and the future duchess all the best in your glorious days ahead, Your Grace.” He bowed his head to the motionless duke. “I hope you have a wonderful, dignified life, you bastard.”

With that, he brushed past the duke, while silently praying that he would remain forever ignorant of Layla's feelings for him. This

was the punishment he wanted to give the duke.

# Chapter 118:
## Not At All

Word spread quickly throughout Karlsbar's high society that Duke Herhardt had started living in seclusion for health reasons. At first some had been skeptical, but by now it was clear that it was true.

Matthias von Herhardt had not been seen at any formal events for weeks. Not even visitors to Arvis got to see him. People's curiosity about him grew day by day, but whenever anyone made inquiries, the Arvis staff gave a terse response, explaining that the duke was under the weather due to overwork, and was staying in his private cabin for rest and recuperation. There had then emerged another rumor that the wedding would have to be postponed. It was for this reason that Claudine von Brandt had decided to pay a visit to Arvis.

“I don't know, Claudine,” Elise von Herhardt said, lowering her fan from her face and smiling faintly. “I'm not sure if he’s even awake.”

After showing up unannounced, Claudine had just expressed her intention to go to Matthias's riverside cabin to visit him and see how he was doing.

“Because he hasn't been feeling well, he's been sleeping quite a lot lately, you see,” Elise added.

“That's quite all right,” Claudine replied. “It will bring me great relief just to see his face, even if he's asleep.”

“Well, Matthias has never been very welcoming to guests when he's at his cabin...”

“I realize that, but I'm not just any guest. I'm his fiancée.”

Normally Claudine would have backed down already, but today she was being persistent.

Ultimately, it was Elise who backed down. She recognized that in the current situation, it wouldn't be possible to pretend like everything was fine and push forward. If Matthias's condition didn't

improve, it could be necessary to postpone the wedding, perhaps by several months. Knowing that there was really nothing she could say to stop Claudine, she nodded and said, “If that's what you want to do, then go ahead.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Claudine replied, smiling. She stood up, making sure to take the bouquet that she had brought with her. The scent of fresh-bloomed roses accompanied her as she left the room.

She had been smiling brightly the entire time she was in the mansion, but as she rode in her family's car along the riverside road towards the duke's cabin, her face was cold and serious.

She had been very curious how Matthias was going to react to Layla's disappearance. Would he brave it out, or would it crush him? Now she knew the answer, and she wasn't happy about it.

As much as she was eager to see him in a pathetic state of despair, a part of her wished that he would maintain his dignity around her. However, based on what she had heard about his current state, it seemed that this wouldn't happen.

The car came to a stop in front of the cabin. As she got out, the smile returned to her face. She was still in a bad mood, but now a sense of eager anticipation was starting to build inside of her as well. *I'm finally getting to see Duke Herhardt as a broken man,* she thought. *I guess I can thank Layla for this as well...*

* * *

Mark Evers knocked on the door to the cabin's drawing room. When no answer came, he quietly stepped inside. “Your Grace, Lady Claudine is...” he said, trailing off when he saw that the duke was in the middle of a phone call. He suspected that the conversation had something to do with Layla Llewellyn.

When the search for Layla and Bill had slowed to a standstill, the duke had taken the matter into his own hands, drawing on all the means at his disposal to try to find them. It had become his singular focus. The rest of his time was spent either asleep from sleeping

pills, or sitting on the cabin's balcony, silently gazing at the river and the forest beyond it.

Mark turned around to head back outside so that he could tell Claudine that she would have to wait. Much to his surprise, however, Claudine was standing in the hallway right behind him. “M-miss Claudine!” he said, flustered. “His Grace is busy right n-”

“Step aside,” she said.

“But-”

“That's an order, Evers,” she snapped back.

Having no other choice, Mark stepped aside and allowed Claudine to enter the room. Just then, Matthias finished his phone call and turned to face them. He was wearing nothing but a loosely tied robe.

Claudine felt a little embarrassed to see him like that, but she stood her ground, as did Matthias.

Smiling in an attempt to appear calm, Claudine spoke first. “Hello, Duke Herhardt.” Her heels clicked on the floor as she walked towards him. “I came to see how you're doing. Obviously, I was quite concerned when I heard that my fiancé was ill.” Still smiling brightly, she stared straight at his gaunt face.

“I see,” he replied. “Have a seat.”

She had expected him to be flustered by her sudden appearance, but he was wearing the same calm smile that he always wore to hide his true feelings. He looked scruffy and unwell, but his posture, movements, and manner of speech were every bit as elegant as usual.

Trying hard to keep her composure, she sat down on the sofa. When he noticed the rose bouquet that she was setting down on the table, a slight smile appeared on his lips, then quickly vanished.

“Can you wait a moment?” he asked. “As you can see, I'm not properly dressed to receive a surprise visit from a lady.”

He was speaking much more slowly and languidly than usual, which gave Claudine a strange feeling. To avoid letting him see her react to this, she tensed her neck and sat up straighter.

“Yes, of course. Take your time,” she replied. Despite the casualness of her response, she was feeling very embarrassed to be looking at a half-naked man, so she lowered her eyes, only looking up again after he had gone to the bedroom.

*Why is he spending all his time holed up in this cabin?* Sipping the tea that a servant had brought her, she looked carefully around the drawing room. *Is it because it reminds him of her?* This thought gave her a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Just then, Matthias returned. He had put on a pair of pants and a shirt, but his hair was still wet and uncombed.

“Are you upset with me for dropping in on you uninvited?” she asked defensively, looking up at him.

Despite his sickly appearance, he was still an imposing presence. If anything, he seemed more threatening than before.

“Not at all,” he replied, casually sitting down across from her. “It's actually quite fortunate that you stopped by. I was planning to set a meeting with you anyway.”

“Whatever for? I can't think of anything you would want to see me about, other than our wedding.”

“Yes, that's exactly what I wanted to see you about,” he calmly replied.

Suddenly she felt nervous. “If you're thinking of postponing our wedding because of your health, I won't hear of it. I don't care if you look a little sickly. As long as your legs can carry you down the aisle, it'll be all right.” Looking him up and down, she added, “And it doesn't look like you'll have any trouble with that.”

“My lady…”

“Don't say another word. I won't listen.”

“Claudine von Brandt.”

Her mind went blank at the sound of him calling her by name. In all the years since it had been first decided that they would get married, she had never heard him address her by name. The atmosphere between the two of them had changed.

Before she had time to reflect on this, he said, “Claudine, let's end

things between us, here and now."

* * *

"Take it easy, Layla. You don't want to overwork yourself."

Layla had been intently focused on the specimens she was organizing. The sound of a voice behind her snapped her out of it. "Don't worry," she replied, smiling as she pushed her glasses up, "this isn't too difficult."

At first she had been a little rusty in her mother tongue, which she hadn't spoken since she was a little girl. But after just a few days' practice, she was speaking like a native again.

"I'm happy to see the dedication you're showing to this job, Layla. I'm going to take off first. Once you finish up with those specimens, you can head home early."

The middle-aged scientist then left, and the laboratory was silent once again.

Layla finished organizing the biological specimens, then gathered up the mail that had to be sent out. She also tidied the scientist's desk, which was covered with papers and opened books.

She then stepped out into the hallway and locked the door to the laboratory. A ray of gentle, early-summer sunlight was coming in through the window. Gripping the strap of her bag, she strode down the long hallway.

Sienne was a city on the southern coast of Lovita, renowned for its harbor and its beautiful ocean view. The laboratory where Layla had just begun working was affiliated with Sienne's natural history museum, which was quite large, though not as large as the one in Ratse.

After rushing to drop off the mail, she stopped by the market to buy some peaches, which she had been longing to eat all day. *If this were Arvis, I could have just grabbed a basket and gone into the woods to pick them,* she thought, chuckling wistfully to herself.

On her way home, it occurred to her that the duke's wedding must be coming up very soon. This thought threw her mind into a

daze, so much so that she didn't notice the bicycle heading straight in her direction as she turned the corner. By the time she realized what was happening, the bicycle was right in front of her.

Onlookers gasped and cried out at the sight of the crash.

* * *

During the long silence that followed, Claudine stood perfectly still, staring straight at Matthias. He returned her gaze. A breeze was blowing in from the river through the open window, causing their hair and clothes to flutter slightly. If it weren't for that, it would have looked like time had stopped.

“How ridiculous,” she finally said. “How dare you say such a thing to me, Duke Herhardt?” She chuckled derisively, and then frowned coldly at him again. “I'm going to assume that your illness has compromised your judgment. I'll just pretend I didn't hear what you said.”

“No, my judgment is clearer than ever, Claudine.”

“What is it, then? Are you planning to search out that lowly orphan and make her your duchess instead of me?”

Claudine was surprised to hear such bold words coming out of her mouth. She felt like she had finally broken character, after having diligently played the part of an elegant lady ever since she had visited Arvis all those years ago and her mother had told her, *“You're not a little girl anymore. Now you're a lady, and you have to act like one.”*

As much as she knew that she should probably stop, she wanted to keep going. “You don't even look surprised, I see,” she said.

Other than raising his eyebrows ever so slightly, Matthias was not showing any emotion.

“That makes sense, I suppose,” she continued. “You had already planned to keep her as your mistress for life, so you have no real reason to hide your feelings from me. Sadly, though, things aren't going to turn out the way you want them to, even if I agree to break off the engagement.” The smile returned to her lips. “Even if you're

lucky enough to find Layla, there's no way she'll go back to you. She already knows about everything. That's why she ran away."

"Everything...?"

"Yes. I told her all about the scheme you selfishly carried out to force her to be with you. And yet you expect her to come running back into your arms? Not likely. There's not a woman in the world who could love a man who would do something so cruel."

Finally, there was a shift in his facial expression.

Grinning slightly, she continued. "Therefore, I'd advise you to abandon your vain hope of being reunited with her, and start living your proper life as Duke Herhardt again. If you do that, I'll put up with you as your duchess."

Leaning deep into his seat, he stared at her, motionless. She couldn't tell what he was thinking, but she didn't particularly care. She was savoring the feeling of having finally removed his mask.

"Do you really not understand what I'm saying?" she asked in a derisive tone, looking at him with cold contempt. "Matthias von Herhardt, you have lost Layla forever."

# Chapter 119:
## A Way Out

Layla limped up the stairs. Luckily, her sprained ankle didn't hurt too much. She had also scraped her knee when she fell, but not too severely.

*Yes, it really could have been much worse,* she told herself as she opened the door to the apartment.

She felt fine while she changed her clothes and tidied up, but her mood was spoiled when she got out the peaches and saw how scratched and bruised they had gotten in the fall.

*What's wrong with me?* she wondered. *Why am I getting so upset over a few lousy peaches?*

She thoroughly washed the peaches and put them on a tray, which she then set down on the kitchen table. When she sat down at the table, however, she just stared at them, and didn't feel like eating one. Instead of reaching out to grab a peach, she had unconsciously wrapped her arms around her belly, just as she had done when the bicycle ran into her and knocked her over.

Luckily, she wasn't feeling any new pain. She had no injuries other than the minor ones on her ankle and knee. Even so, she still didn't feel like eating. She had a queasy feeling that something inside her was causing her agony, but it didn't feel like something that she could get rid of by throwing up.

She sat hunched up at the table for a long while. She wanted to go to her room and lie down, but with her nausea and limp, she was afraid that she would get dizzy and fall. At that moment, she realized that this nausea had cleared her mind of the troubling thoughts that had been keeping her up at night since running away from Arvis.

Once her stomach settled, she carefully got up and opened the kitchen window. A gentle sea breeze blew in, soothing her sweat-beaded forehead.

She returned to the table, picked the least damaged of the peaches, and took a bite. The sweet flavor of its juice filled her mouth and made her nose tingle.

She proceeded to eat two entire peaches.

* * *

The early-summer sky looked peaceful as Matthias lay floating on the water, gazing up at it. Now and then he saw a cloud drifting along or some birds flying by. The river's water was a dreamlike shade of blue. The sound and texture of the water was also dreamlike, as was the feeling of his own existence.

After letting the current carry him for a while, he turned over again and started swimming, leaving a long wake on the calm surface of the water. As his breath grew more labored and his body filled with pain from the exertion, he felt all the more calm inside. Chasing this feeling of calm, he kept swimming with all his might.

True to his word, Dr. Ettman had severely reduced the number of sleeping pills in the prescription. By doing this, he had demonstrated that his views as a doctor came before the demands of his patients. He had made this decision after Matthias had slept for two days straight.

Matthias had previously comforted himself with the thought that he could just find another doctor to prescribe him more sleeping pills, but now that he was faced with the task of actually doing this, he felt hesitant. Rumors about his health problems had already spread throughout Karlsbar. He didn't want to fuel even more rumors by seeing an unscrupulous doctor.

He was out of pills, but he had to sleep. Thus he only had one option left: tormenting his own body with physical exertion. Over the previous few days, he had discovered that exercising to the point of exhaustion was just as effective as sleeping pills.

*"I'm afraid this behavior is not good for your long-term health, Your Grace,"* Dr. Ettman had said during his house call the previous evening, looking at Matthias as if he were gazing at the most pitiful

person in the world.

*"I'm getting plenty of exercise and sleep. Seems like a pretty healthy lifestyle to me,"* Matthias had scoffed.

However, the doctor's response had made it clear that he wasn't joking around. *"Exercise and sleep are healthy, but only in moderation. You're overdoing it, Your Grace. I'm worried that sleep has become an escape for you. That's not healthy. Now, I want to help you. I hope that is clear. But even the best doctor can't help a patient who doesn't want to get better. And you can only get better by finding the true source of your problems and tackling it head-on."*

Dr. Ettman had said this in the disappointed tone of a father lecturing his son. It was something Matthias had never heard before.

He could tell that the doctor was sincerely worried about him. He was a skilled doctor, and an honorable man.

*Kyle Ettman will probably rise to a similar level,* Matthias thought.

Dr. Ettman not only looked like his son, but was good-hearted like him. Gazing at him, Matthias had smiled bitterly.

Kyle Ettman and Layla Llewellyn would have made a great couple. All of the residents of Arvis agreed on this, and even Matthias readily accepted it.

If Layla had married Kyle, she would have been happy. She would have been studying at college right now, while being treated well by a good man who loved her. They would have been a charming couple, and everyone would have wished them well. It would have more than made up for her lonely, difficult childhood. Instead of withering away in a painful, tearful life as the mistress of a man she hated and feared, she could have been living a happy, joyful life.

And yet, even while recognizing all of this, Matthias didn't regret a thing. This perplexed him to no end.

*If I could go back in time, would I act differently? Not a chance.*

He could be put in the same situation a hundred times, and he would still make the same decisions each time. It was who he was.

He wasn't a man of virtue and integrity like Dr. Ettman and his son. He pretended to be one while in the public eye, but when he was alone with Layla, even pretending to be virtuous was impossible for him.

*I don't want her to become some other bastard's woman, even if it would make her happy. I'd rather take her back for myself and make her miserable again. Either that or kill her. But this doctor wants to talk to me about the true source of my problems?*

He had simply chuckled, rather than saying anything in response to Dr. Ettman's advice.

*"You have lost Layla forever."*

When Claudine had said this to him, it hadn't come as much of a shock. He was already painfully aware of it. Hearing someone else put it into words wasn't a big deal. The same was true of Kyle's assertion that he didn't have the right to look for Layla. That too was a fact of which he had already been well aware, although it pained him to think about it.

Once his body was so drained of energy that he could hardly move a muscle anymore, he started floating on his back again as he caught his breath. His severely emaciated but still strong and muscular body glistened in the sunlight.

When he had done nothing but laugh in response to Dr. Ettman's warning, the doctor had grown even more concerned and said, *"If you don't like my advice or you don't trust me, I can refer you to another doctor. But I can't in good faith continue to stand by and watch you destroy yourself like this, Your Grace."*

Thinking back on this now, Matthias grinned faintly and shook his head. He knew he wasn't likely to be able to find another doctor better than Dr. Ettman. No matter who else Dr. Ettman dragged in as a replacement, nothing would change. Unless the person he brought was Layla herself. Or God.

*"A change of scenery might be effective as well. How about going on a short vacation somewhere?"*

Matthias had shook his head at this final suggestion immediately.

As far as he was concerned, he was only doing as well as he was because he had been staying at the cabin, which was chock-full of things that reminded him of Layla.

Of course, to her it had been a terrifying place of despair where she had cried and quivered in fear while enduring his presence. To him, however, it was more like a temple where he could worship her memory. By now he had decided to accept that his desperate feelings for Layla were more like a religion than anything else. He was behaving just like a religious fanatic.

*Should I go back?* As his senses started to blur, he looked over his shoulder. However, his body had started moving again, as if of its own accord. His muscles were aching intensely from exhaustion, but they wouldn't stop.

The fact was, he was afraid. Afraid that if he stopped moving, he would once again be bombarded with memories of Layla. These memories felt both like his salvation, and like the thing that was going to strangle him to death.

His face was contorted with pain, and yet this thought caused him to chuckle. Just then, he noticed a large tree near the edge of the river. It was a tree that Layla had loved to climb. He could see her blonde hair fluttering and shimmering in the sunlight. He knew it was a hallucination, but it was still a welcome respite from the misery of his present state.

Smiling bitterly, he closed his eyes and allowed his body to start sinking into the water. His life had once been easy and had flowed along like the current on the river's surface. He knew those days were gone now. All that was left for him was to sink deep down and rot.

*What use is there in thrashing about, then?*

He could feel his body sinking, but he felt no urge to save himself. Once he was deep enough that he could no longer hear the babbling sounds of the water's surface, he suddenly thought of the diaries that he had found in Layla's room in the abandoned cottage.

In those diaries, he had read about a person who had faced

nothing but difficulties from a cruel world, and yet had been determined to love the world and make the best life for herself that she could. However, that life was now gone. He had ruined it for her.

He opened his eyes and gazed up at the distant surface of the water, on which fragmented rays of sunlight were dancing beautifully. The sight reminded him of Layla's tears. This thought brought the first sincere, peaceful smile to his lips since the day he had lost her. He wanted to sink into her tears and fall into an eternal sleep. This was his last memory from that afternoon.

* * *

When he opened his eyes again, much to his surprise, the first thing he saw was Layla. Just like their first morning together, she was lying next to him in bed, gazing quietly at his face.

*You came back...*

He tried to speak, but no sound came out, so he just reached out and gently caressed her face, as he had done that day. Her eyes gleamed beautifully as they continued to gaze at each other.

*Layla...*

As he opened his lips to whisper her name, he suddenly became aware that she wasn't really there. His hallucination of her disappeared in a flash, and was replaced by the sight of himself lying pathetically in a bed lit by sunlight coming in through the window.

“Ah, you're awake.”

The sound of a familiar voice brought him fully back to reality. It was Dr. Ettman, sounding very relieved.

“If your servants hadn't chanced to find you in the river, you might have drowned.”

In a scolding tone, the doctor proceeded to tell him what had happened the previous day. Matthias felt bored hearing the story. To him, it was just the story of a pathetic man who lost control of his body and nearly drowned, but in the end was saved and now

had to listen to a doctor pestering him about safety.

As the doctor's longwinded lecture dragged on, Matthias thought back to the beautiful hallucinations in which he had just been immersed.

*That day, when we gazed into each other's eyes for so long as we lay in bed, she seemed enraptured by the sight of me. Was she putting on an act even then?*

This thought made him feel like he was drowning again.

*Maybe she was. If so, what can I do?*

He felt like a child facing a reality that he was powerless to do anything about.

*If my feelings for her may never end, but I can't keep living like this, then what can I do?*

“Your Grace? Are you listening?”

He could hear Dr. Ettman's voice, but his words were just meaningless noise in his ears.

He was gripped by fear, frantically trying to think of a solution to his problems. Just then, the sound of a bird singing came in through the open window. Immediately it reminded him of his dead canary.

Sitting up in bed, he squinted and looked out the window.

Just as he often saw Layla in his mind, sometimes he could hear his dead canary singing as well. Somehow, the canary's phantom song didn't torment him in the way that his visions of Layla did. Reflecting on this discrepancy, it occurred to him that this was because the bird was dead. This realization showed him that there was a way out of his predicament after all.

*Of course. It's so simple.*

Suddenly he felt excitement surging up inside him, as if he had just found a light at the end of the tunnel.

*If I've really lost her forever... If I can really never get her back… then I should just kill her instead.*

His heart started pounding with joy.

“Your Grace...?” Trailing off at the sight of the strange smile spreading across Matthias's face, Dr. Ettman gulped nervously.

Just then, the phone started ringing.

# Chapter 120:
## Unhinged

Matthias answered the phone. It seemed to be his assistant calling from the other room. After a brief exchange, he hung up, and footsteps could be heard approaching the bedroom.

When Mark Evers arrived and entered the room, Matthias took one glance at the look on his face, and then turned to Dr. Ettman and asked, “Would you mind excusing us for a moment?”

Dr. Ettman had no choice but to vacate the bedroom. As soon as he did, Mark walked to the foot of the duke's bed and said, “We have just received word that some progress has been made in the search, Your Grace. Mr. Remmer has a distant relative living in Lovita. And we have confirmed with immigration authorities that Mr. Remmer and Layla Llewellyn crossed the border into Lovita.”

Mark said all this very quietly, even though no one was likely to be listening in. He also wasn't sure if it was a good idea to be delivering this news when the duke had just regained consciousness after his accident at the river, but the duke had made him promise to keep him updated on the search no matter what.

“A relative in Lovita? Where in Lovita?” Matthias asked in a surprisingly calm tone of voice, gazing out the window at the birds chirping in the trees.

“We... have not been able to figure that out yet, Your Grace.”

Matthias turned towards Mark. “Tell them to find out. As soon as possible.” Despite the urgency of his command, his face looked completely calm. There was no hint of the unhinged demeanor he had been displaying recently.

For a moment, Mark thought that the duke was back to his usual self. However, he soon had to revise this judgment.

The duke stared blankly into space for several seconds, and then suddenly started smiling. It was an innocent, delighted smile, like that of a child opening a gift. After a moment, the smile

disappeared. The sight of this gave Mark a chill that stuck with him for a long while afterwards.

It seemed that the duke was still unhinged.

* * *

“Ooh!” Layla exclaimed with sincere wonder and admiration at the pale-brown leather bag that Uncle Bill had just casually set down on the kitchen table. Even at a glance, it was clear that the finely stitched bag was of very high quality. “But I don't get it—why are you giving me a gift out of the blue like this, Uncle Bill?”

“Well… I don't need a reason to give you a gift, do I?” he replied, bashfully scratching the back of his neck. “But if you want, you can think of it as a late birthday present, since I wasn't able to get you anything back in the spring...”

Layla smiled. Now that she thought about it, her birthday had come and gone during the spring. She had completely forgotten about it. Perhaps, in fact, she had wanted to forget about it. She didn't want to dwell on this, however.

“Thank you, Uncle Bill. But isn't this bag too expensive?” she asked, looking at him with both joy and concern.

“Too expensive? Nah, it looks nice, but it was cheap.”

“I don't believe you!”

“Are you calling me a liar?” he asked in mock indignation. “Fine. If you don't like it, you can throw it into the ocean.”

“Oh, I like it all right,” she quickly replied, pulling the bag into her embrace. “I just don't feel right accepting such an expensive-”

“If you keep talking like that, I'm going to throw it into the ocean.” A contented smile spread across his face. “I only buy things worth buying, so you don't have to worry, Layla. All I want is for you to be happy.” He gently patted her head, as if he were touching a delicate, fragile object.

He had bought the gift simply because he was worried about Layla, who had been suffering from some sort of strange illness ever since they had arrived in Sienne. He just wanted to make her smile.

It was strange—even after all these years, he still often saw Layla as a little girl. Thus, seeing her sick pained his heart deeply.

He watched her for a moment as she looked closely at the bag, admiring its exquisite stitching and craftsmanship, and then he impulsively asked, “What do you say you sling that bag over your shoulder and we go out on a walk?”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now! It's the weekend, and the weather is great. Seems like the perfect time for an outing or something.”

As he said this, he looked out the window at the bright summer sky. The weather wasn't as nice as he had said—it was sweltering outside. He started to regret suggesting an outing, until he saw the delighted look on Layla's face as she nodded enthusiastically.

“That sounds wonderful, Uncle Bill,” she said, grabbing his hand. Her tiny hand felt very warm. “Let's go on an outing.”

* * *

They walked down the street, holding hands. At first Bill tried to pull his hand away, but Layla was persistent. Eventually he gave in and gladly held her hand.

As they happened to pass their downstairs neighbor, she smiled and walked up to them, saying, “Miss Llewellyn! Are you out on a walk with your father?”

Everyone in the neighborhood assumed that Bill and Layla were father and daughter. Layla had no desire to correct this misapprehension, so she nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“What did she say?” Bill asked once the neighbor was out of earshot.

“She asked if I was out on a walk with my father. So I said yes,” she replied, looking sheepishly up at him.

*Father...?* Bill mulled over this word for a moment, then laughed it off. *That poor girl gave her body to the duke in order to buy my freedom. I don't deserve to be called her father. Still, I like the ring of it... Father...* While he felt a little guilty, hearing her call him her

father filled him with pride.

*Is she going to keep calling me that...?* he wondered as they continued to walk to the square. He continued to think about it as they ate lunch and went on a walk along the seaside. Just as he was about to ask her if she intended to keep calling her his father, he looked over at her smiling face and lost the nerve to say anything. He had a tingling feeling in his chest. It felt somewhat like he was being tickled with a feather, and somewhat like he was being stabbed with a knife. Either way, he felt very guilty.

Just as he was starting to feel tears welling up in his eyes, they arrived at the beach. Clean, white sand extended for miles up the coast. There seemed to be some sort of lively summer festival going on that weekend. The vendors' colorful stalls and parasols made it look like a flower garden.

They bought ice creams and ate them together. Lately Layla had been so hesitant to eat anything, Bill had worried that she might be sick. She didn't hesitate at all in devouring the ice cream, however.

They started walking down the beach. Layla looked very happy and excited as she walked with her shoes and socks off. They laughed merrily. Neither of them could remember when they had last had such a good time. They decided to focus on the present. That was all that really mattered, after all.

As the sun was setting, they returned home and finished off their day. The following day wasn't much different.

*What does it matter what she calls me?* Bill thought, looking at Layla across the breakfast table on Monday morning. *No matter what she calls me, the fact remains that we're family.*

Soon, he noticed that she kept glancing at him furtively. “Layla, is there something you want to talk to me about?” he asked.

Now that he thought about it, she had been glancing at him now and then since the previous day.

She paused for a moment, then replied, “No... I don't. We should get going. It's time to leave for work.”

She was smiling brightly, but he still felt suspicious.

Something was clearly on her mind. What could she be hiding? He tried to think what it could be, but nothing came to mind. Meanwhile, they reached the square, which was the spot where they always parted ways to go to their respective workplaces.

Normally the square was full of bustling energy at this time of morning, but today for some reason it was quiet and solemn. A large crowd of people was gathered around the bulletin board in front of City Hall. They seemed sad and morose, as if they were at a funeral.

“I'm going to go see what's going on,” Layla told Bill.

As she entered the crowd, she heard mournful sighs and sobs all around her. She discovered the reason for this as soon as she got to the front of the crowd and read the notice on the bulletin board.

A wartime mobilization order had been declared, ordering all men eligible for conscription to enlist in the military.

* * *

“If he has a serious illness, wouldn't it be better to postpone the wedding? I know that sounds embarrassing to you, but you don't want a sickly groom walking down the aisle,” Countess Brandt said, frowning at her daughter.

The ice cubes clinked as they held their glasses of punch.

“He's not ill,” Claudine replied, nipping her mother's concern in the bud while looking angrily at the large garden next to the terrace.

“You said he hasn't been eating or sleeping and has lost a lot of weight,” Countess Brandt replied. “Matthias always used to take good care of his health. If he's not ill, what's the matter with him?”

“It doesn't matter. Even if he does have an illness, we can't postpone the wedding again, Mother,” Claudine firmly replied. As far as she was concerned, the decision to postpone the wedding the previous summer had been a grave mistake. If they had just pushed forward with the wedding at that time, she wouldn't have had to be dealing with any of the problems facing her now.

Matthias had said that he would give her until the following weekend to come up with a way to frame the situation in the Brandt family's favor, such that it would look like they were the ones choosing to call off the engagement, not him. Claudine had practically screamed at him for this, but he hadn't batted an eye. His composure had been truly disturbing to witness. Whenever Claudine thought back on that interaction, it filled her with anger and fear.

She had told him exactly how she had found out about the way he had helped Mrs. Ettman stop Layla and Kyle from getting married. She had also told him about how she had guessed about his relationship with Layla and how he had been tormenting her.

She had revealed all this to him with the expectation that it would upset him, but he had reacted with no more than a dry chuckle, and then had repeated his declaration that their engagement was over. He had said this with almost inhuman coldness. *Maybe he is sick after all,* Claudine mused. *But it's not a physical ailment. He just has a total lack of compassion.*

"I'm worried about him, Claudine," Countess Brandt said as she slowly fanned her furrowed brow. "The men in the Herhardt family have tended to die young. I know you think he's not in poor health, but-"

"I'm going to marry him, Mother. The wedding is happening, period."

She hated Matthias so much that it gave her the chills just to think about him, but this only made her all the more determined to marry him. The ultimate revenge she could take on him would be to make him her husband.

But was that still possible?

Now that she knew just how ruthless he was, it seemed like he was capable of anything. If she didn't use the time he had given her and come up with a way for her family to save face, then he might well announce the breaking off of their engagement himself.

*How dare he do that to me because of that lowly girl?*

Just then, Claudine was snapped out of her introspection by Marie, her maid, who had just frantically run up to her. “C-countess Brandt! Miss Claudine!”

Marie had never behaved like this before. Her face had gone pale and her whole body was trembling.

“What's the matter? Why are you shouting?” Countess Brandt asked in a scolding tone.

Marie broke into tears and replied, “It's war! They say that war has broken out!”

# Chapter 121:
## Two Pieces of News

While the war started between only two countries, it rapidly spread across the entire continent. It all started when Lovita, which led the Southern Alliance, declared war on the Berg Empire, the strongest of the northern countries. Berg then declared war on Lovita in response. Due to the complex system of treaties and alliances across the continent, the rest of the countries were soon swept up in the war as well, dividing the continent into two opposing forces.

On the same day that Berg's emperor stood in front of the citizens and resolutely proclaimed the mobilization order, Matthias received another piece of news. He learned that Bill Remmer's Lovitan relative resided in the city of Sienne, on Lovita's southern coast.

Prior to the war, Lovita had been a neighboring country that anyone from Berg could visit as they pleased. Overnight, it had become an enemy state, making further investigation impossible. Matthias didn't mind this, however, because he already had all the information he needed. Now that he knew where Layla had run off to, he just needed to find a way to go there himself.

“Are you serious, Captain Herhardt?” Matthias's commanding officer, a general, asked, looking skeptically at him. “As I've already mentioned, that area will probably become a ferocious battlefield.”

“Yes, I know.”

Matthias's excessively calm reply baffled the general all the more. As an officer, if Matthias wanted, he could easily obtain a post at a quiet supply unit, away from the vanguard. The general had recommended this to him. And yet Matthias had instead insisted on being sent to the front line.

“I'm going to go to Sienne.”

Taken aback by Matthias's insistence, the middle-aged general eventually let out a dry laugh.

With Matthias, the Berg Empire's Sixth Infantry would be tasked with breaking through the right wing of the front line and advancing southward to capture Lovita's naval base. Their ultimate target was Sienne. If the Berg Army could seize and occupy the naval base there, it would greatly weaken all the forces in the Southern Alliance.

“If that's really what you want to do, I guess there's no sense in trying to stop you,” the general said, signing his approval on the documents Matthias had brought. “I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You are a Herhardt, after all,” he added, as if that name explained everything.

As the Berg Empire had rose over many generations to become the richest, most powerful nation on the continent, it had fought countless wars, and the Herhardt family had readily offered its sons to these wars. The young men of the Herhardt family fought on fiercer front lines, and won more glory and honor, than even the princes of the imperial family. All aristocrats in Berg knew exactly how that history and honor had been made.

Matthias saluted the general and left the office. Some aristocratic officers started whispering to each other when they saw him, but he paid them no mind, and casually passed by them. He looked like someone out on a leisurely afternoon stroll. Once he was out of earshot, they started gossiping about him at full volume.

“I could've sworn I heard that he was gravely ill and was staying at home to recuperate. Was that a lie?”

“No, I'm pretty sure it's true that he was sick... But why did he look so happy just now? Is the House of Herhardt in the munitions industry or something?”

“I'm sure they are. What industry don't they have business in? But even so, he's about to be sent off to the battlefield, and he looks like he's on his way to a picnic. Is he right in the head?”

“Maybe he thinks that as a Herhardt his destiny will save him from death on the battlefield. Although things didn't work out so well for the previous dukes in his family, of course.”

They continued exchanging snide remarks long after he was out of sight. They couldn't understand his blithe attitude, given that they were all bound by destiny to go risk their lives for the sake of family honor.

“Calm down. Duke Herhardt isn't our enemy,” one of the officers finally said.

With that comment, the group's overzealous criticism of Matthias quickly died down, and the men returned to a frightened silence. No one spoke for a long time after that.

* * *

“How could this be happening? I can't believe it,” Elise von Herhardt said, breaking into tears again. “In these prosperous modern times, how can a barbaric war break out, Matthias?!” She looked at her son with bloodshot eyes.

Dowager Herhardt and the other relatives present looked similarly distraught. Only Matthias, the one who was actually about to head off to war, looked more or less the same as normal, maintaining a calm, dignified bearing with a polite smile on his face throughout the interaction.

“The war front is south of the Berg-Lovita border, so the fighting won't reach Arvis. I know the war seemed to break out suddenly, but war clouds have been looming for many years. Each country's military plans were already secured, and our company already had a contingency plan in place.”

He was speaking just as calmly as he did when participating in business meetings.

“It's inevitable that the resources branch of our company will face some damage, but it's predicted that our overseas oilfields will be safe from the aftermath of the war. The loss won't be huge. The board has put the company's plans to develop the swamps northeast of Karlsbar on hold, but the project will resume once the war has concluded.”

Matthias went on like this, delivering a detailed report on all the

actions he had taken to deal with the international turmoil that had resulted after the outbreak of war threw the stock market into confusion.

The day that war was announced, Matthias emerged from his cabin. He looked well-groomed and not at all sickly, and didn't seem particularly concerned about the earth-shattering news. He just calmly began preparing to do his part for the war. His face was still noticeably gaunt, but he had regained the lively glint in his eyes, so he no longer looked ill.

“And since each of the branches of our family's company has its own management structure, things should keep running smoothly even with my absence. We have also built a system to prepare specifically for this.”

“The company is one thing, but won't we have to rush the wedding now?” Dowager Herhardt asked, having regained some of her composure. “With the current situation, it doesn't seem possible to hold the ceremony at the scheduled time, so we'd better wrap things up before you head off to war.”

“If you're worried about an heir...” Matthias paused for a moment and looked at the various members of his family. “I won't be able to defer my departure very long. There's no guaranteeing that I would be able to father an heir in that time, so I don't think it would make much sense to push forth with a hasty wedding.”

“But, Matthias...”

“Suppose that Claudine and I got married and then I went off to war without having fathered a son, and then failed to return. Claudine would be a lonely widow who had only lived with her husband for a few weeks at most. In my opinion, that would be much too cruel a thing to do to Claudine and the Brandt family.”

Even as he was speculating about his own possible death, he showed no signs of fear or anguish. He was showing all the poise and virtue that he had been raised to display.

“Of course, I should emphasize that I do see it as my duty to return home safe and sound. Rest assured that I will do all I can to

make that happen, Grandmother."

A gentle smile appeared on his face as he said this. However, his tone was resolute and stubborn, as if to indicate that there was no room for reconsideration. While everyone else remained silent, he continued his report.

"However, if the worst does happen, I have prepared a contingency plan to help you find a worthy heir among the collateral family line."

Elise had always been proud of her son, but as she watched him calmly delivering this report to the family, she felt a pang of guilt. Sure enough, he was a perfect duke, just like his father and grandfather had been. Viewed as an ordinary person, however, was his life truly complete?

As she mulled over this question, her tears started to fall again. However, she couldn't bring herself to ask the question that was burning inside her: *Do you really have to go off to the battlefield?* They were Herhardts. The family name always took precedence over personal feelings.

"When my late husband, your grandfather, was duke and war broke out, he didn't hesitate in fighting for the empire and giving his life," Dowager Herhardt said, gazing at her grandson.

Generations of Herhardts had spent centuries building up the reputation that the family enjoyed today. And they had accepted all the duties and responsibilities that came with that honor.

"The same was true of your father," Dowager Herhardt added. A look of grief flashed across her face as she thought of her son's death, before she regained her composure. "Those sacrifices make me proud to be a Herhardt. My husband and son were brave and honorable men, and I will never stop feeling proud of them. But even so, Matthias..." Her voice started to quiver slightly. "I would like so much to see you grow old. Don't you think Arvis needs at least one portrait of an older, silver-haired duke, among all the young dukes adorning its walls?"

"That's a good point," Elise remarked, smiling along with her

mother-in-law. “You inherited your hair from my side of the family, Matthias, so if you want gray hair, you'll have to live for quite a while longer.”

She casually pointed to her own hair. Even in her middle age, it was lustrous and black.

“Yes, Grandmother, and yes, Mother,” Matthias replied, smiling at each of the former duchesses in turn. “I will do my best to make that happen.”

* * *

“You must be so happy. You've managed to evade marriage once again,” Claudine quipped.

Count and Countess Brandt had left the room, leaving only Matthias and Claudine in the drawing room.

The wedding was being temporarily postponed. Although Claudine was not happy about it, her family's decision had not changed. If Matthias were to go off to war right after the wedding and die in battle, Claudine would be left a childless widow. In that case, the Herhardt family's aristocratic title would be transferred to a collateral member of Matthias's family, making Claudine's and Matthias's marriage all but meaningless.

Count Brandt thus insisted that the best course of action would be to postpone the wedding once again and hope for the best in the future. After all, there was no shame in postponing a wedding when a war was going on. The biggest danger was the Herhardt family, which might have wanted to push forward with a wedding no matter what in order to create an heir. Luckily, however they had said that they would respect the Brandt family's opinion.

*Respect*—that word had stung Claudine's ears when she heard her father say it with relief.

“I don't know about that,” Matthias replied. “Who would be happy at such a tragic event as war breaking out?”

The unhinged demeanor that he had shown on the day he first told Claudine that he intended to break off the engagement was

gone. By all appearances, he seemed to have fully returned to his normal self. Nonetheless, Claudine could sense that inside he hadn't changed a bit.

“As I told you that day,” she said, “I will not allow our engagement to be broken off, no matter what anyone does or says. I will patiently await your safe return, so that you can finally become my husband.”

“Using the excuse of war to cleanly break off the engagement is the best way for you and your family to save face.”

“Now you're worried about me and my family? When did you become so selfless, Duke Herhardt?” she scoffed.

As always, he stared back at her with cold, emotionless eyes. Those blue eyes looked completely inhuman to her now.

“You probably want to blame Layla's flight on me. You think that if you break off our engagement, then she'll return to you. But you're wrong. It wasn't because of me, it was because of you.” Her eyes were starting to fill with tears. “If you take away the nice exterior of your Herhardt name, you're just a monster underneath. A coldblooded monster.”

# Chapter 122:
## The Way to the Ocean

By now, Claudine found herself just as detestable as she found Matthias. She knew that her relationship with him was over, but she wouldn't admit it. Instead, she kept getting nastier and nastier with him. However, realizing this only made it harder for her to stop.

If she was going down, it was only fair that she bring him down with her.

“You will never get her back. If she's anything like me, I bet she'd rather die than go back to a monster like you,” she said.

“That wouldn't be so bad,” the handsome monster replied, maintaining his calm smile even as Claudine grew more and more upset. “If she dies, at least she can't run away from me anymore.”

“So you're willing to kill Layla if she won't go back to you?”

“I am.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Maybe.”

She stared at him wide-eyed as he said these disturbing things while maintaining his gentlemanly composure.

“It sounds like you're threatening me to do as you say if I don't want to fear for my life,” she said.

“Don't be silly,” he replied, frowning in mock indignation. “Why would I threaten you, when I'm the one who is calling for our engagement to be broken off? Naturally, I will bear the brunt of the criticism for the reputational harm I'm causing you and your family.”

He was now speaking more politely, with a gentle expression on his face. This was even more irritating to Claudine than his earlier attitude.

“What if I still don't change my mind, even after you've absorbed all the criticism? Then what will you do? Kill me?” she asked.

“I doubt it will come to that,” he replied, rising from his seat. “There are many ways to keep someone alive, while making them suffer a fate worse than death.” He pulled back his shirt cuff to check his watch, then smiled at her. “Of course, I trust that it won't come to that, either. I know you're smarter than that.”

“You don't know me.”

She started to cry in a way that she hadn't cried since she was a little girl. She had cast aside her true love, Riette, and was instead enduring life with this coldhearted monster. She had lowered herself to the lowest depths of depravity in order to get rid of the monster's mistress. She had done all this just so that she could attain the envied position of duchess. As she reflected on this, passionate tears continued to flow from her eyes.

“You don't know anything about me. You have no idea who you're dealing with.”

She put her face in her hands and continued sobbing. Someone watching from afar would assume that they were witnessing a woman crying over the sadness of her fiancé leaving for war.

Matthias stood for a while, looking down at her, then politely bowed his head and left. As he exited the Brandt mansion, the bright, clear sky dazzled his eyes. He chuckled to himself.

That summer, on the day that there was originally supposed to be a lavish wedding, Duke Herhardt instead reported for duty as an officer in Berg's Sixth Infantry. His unit's destination was Sienne, the city on the southern coast of Lovita, famed for its beautiful ocean.

* * *

The retching sounds continued for a while before finally subsiding. Kyle stood up unsteadily, then staggered a few steps to sit and catch his breath in the shade of a nearby tree. As the army surgeons busily went in and out of the field hospital, a strong scent of blood and antiseptic wafted off of them.

Kyle felt another wave of nausea coming on, but luckily it died down on its own. It seemed that his body had given up, now that it

had nothing left to expel.

A surgeon approached him and asked, “You feeling any better?”

The question snapped Kyle out of his daze. “Not really. Have a seat.”

The surgeon sat down next to Kyle and offered him his canteen. The surgeon had graduated from the same medical school where Kyle was studying. Of all the men in the unit, he was the only one who looked after Kyle.

Accepting the canteen from him, Kyle took a swig of water, swished it around in his mouth, and then spit it out. Then he took a large gulp of water and swallowed it. As his mind became clearer, the screams coming from inside the barracks grew clearer as well. It sounded like injured soldiers were waking up after surgery.

“How much longer until we get to Sienne?” Kyle asked in an exhausted voice as he gazed up at the treetops. By this time of year, the trees back in Karlsbar were already starting to change color, but here in Lovita they were still green.

“At our current rate, we should be arriving there very soon,” the surgeon replied, patting Kyle's shoulder to comfort him. “I know it's tough, but try to hang in there, Kyle. Luckily, our side is doing much better in the war. If our luck holds up, we might be home by winter.”

Kyle had been hearing optimistic promises like this every day, while the bloodshed and gore only grew all the time. Nonetheless, he nodded. If the gruesome injuries he was seeing in the field hospital were what winning looked like, he didn't want to imagine what things looked like for the losing side.

The war had turned his life upside overnight. Shortly after the shocking mobilization announcement, he had been conscripted, as had many other medical students from his program.

The impression that the war had been unexpected was quickly dispelled. The empire was carrying out a detailed war plan, which they had already had in place prior to the declaration of war. The task of drafting millions of troops, training and arming them, and

then sending them to the front lines was accomplished in the blink of an eye. It was frightening how quick and efficient the process was. Once Kyle arrived at the front line, he realized that behind the scenes, the empire had been planning for war for a long time, while waiting for just the right time and pretext.

He was in a complete daze. By the time he came to his senses, he was already at the battlefield. He had been assigned to be a medic for a unit that was attacking the southern line. He had barely completed one year of college, but since he was a student at the empire's best medical school, he was occasionally summoned to the field hospital to help out in the operation room. This tended to happen when a lot of wounded soldiers had just come in, as was the case today.

Just as Kyle and the surgeon were about to go back into the operating room, their superior office stopped them and said, “You two—head over to the commanders' barracks.”

“Is there an injured officer?”

“They say that a company commander has been shot. Sounds like he has some other minor wounds, too. Anyway, given that he hasn't been taken to the operating room, it can't be too severe, so you two should be able to handle it. Take care of it and report back here.” He then hurried back into the field hospital.

Unlike the surgeon sitting calmly next to him, Kyle looked visibly shaken. As he went to the storage room to get a first-aid kit, he kept thinking to himself, *Please let it be him... Please let it be the duke...*

* * *

Layla squinted her eyes as she watched the line of trucks exiting the museum warehouse. Her hand was trembling uneasily as it gripped the strap of her bag.

For several days now, the same thing had been happening. Precious fossils and gems from the museum's collection were being transported away somewhere. The museum director had told the worried employees that it was all just a precaution, but it was clear

to everyone that something out of the ordinary was going on.

Once the trucks had disappeared down the road, Layla started walking. Most of the vehicles in the city had been commandeered by the military, so the roads were quiet. On the other hand, groups of refugees were gathering all over the city.

Sienne's mayor had declared that the military forces in the Southern Alliance would turn the tides of the war very soon, and that Sienne itself would be safe. The refugees, however, claimed otherwise. They were saying that Berg's army was driving southward at a ferocious pace, and that Lovita had abandoned the northeastern front and sent all its forces to the western front in order to defend the capital. Thus it seemed like Lovita's high command might be planning to leave Sienne defenseless against a Berg attack.

Of course, the citizens of Sienne vehemently disputed this prediction, claiming that the king would not give up the city so easily, since its naval base made it a key point for distributing military supplies. The fierceness of the citizens' denial came from their deep fear of attack. Everyone knew this, but no one would state it openly. Bill and Layla were no different.

Layla went to the market, then hurried back home. As the war dragged on, distribution chains had been severely disrupted, causing the cost of food to rise day by day. The amount of money that used to cover a week's food for two people, now wouldn't even cover enough for one person.

Before starting on dinner, Layla went to her room and lay down on the bed. Her back had been bothering her a lot recently, making it hard to stand up for very long. When she took off her support belt, it felt a lot better, but it didn't seem like she could continue like this for much longer.

Her mind wandered from one thought to another, and soon she fell into a light sleep. Shortly thereafter, she was suddenly awakened by the sound of a loud boom.

*Did someone just drop something heavy upstairs?*

As she casually sat up, rubbing her eyes, there was suddenly another boom. This one was even louder. Its thunderous roar echoed through the streets outside. At the same time, she heard Bill screaming for her.

“Layla! Layla!”

Before she had time to respond, he had opened her door and run up to her, with a terrified look on his face.

“We've got to get out of here, Layla! Right now!”

There was no time to explain, so he scooped Layla's frightened body into his arms and started running out. Just as they made it to the street, another deafening explosion reverberated all around them.

It was an air raid.

* * *

The company commander from the cavalry regiment had only had his shin grazed by a piece of grenade shrapnel, but he was crying like a baby. It was hard to imagine how such a faint-hearted man had risen to the rank of a commander.

Kyle let out a silent sigh and turned around. Absentmindedly gazing around the room, his eyes happened to settle on the man he hated: Duke Herhardt. Or, as he was known here, Major Herhardt. Regardless of the title, he was someone that Kyle wanted to kill more than the enemy. Disappointingly, he appeared to be unscathed.

As soon as the antiseptic was applied to the cavalry commander's wound, he started screaming again. Perhaps because of the noise, Kyle became even more aware of Matthias von Herhardt, who was sitting with his legs crossed, smoking a cigarette, watching his fellow soldier shriek in agony as if he were watching some light entertainment.

“Hey, medic! Don't just stand there, go attend to the major!” an officer shouted at Kyle.

Only then did Kyle realize that he had been glaring at the duke.

He reflexively responded to the officer and walked over to the duke. Even from up close, he looked completely uninjured, much to Kyle's dismay.

They stared at each other until Kyle broke the silence, asking, “Will you show me your wound, Major?”

Matthias took off his military coat and slowly raised the left sleeve of his combat fatigues. Kyle frowned when he saw what appeared to be an improvised bandage, soaked in blood. It was more blood than he would have expected from a minor wound.

“May I take a look?”

Matthias responded to Kyle's question with a quick nod. He was acting indifferently enough to make Kyle feel silly for harboring such animosity towards him.

The duke was always like this. When Kyle found out that they had been assigned to the same unit, he was very upset, but the duke paid him no mind, as if Kyle were no more notable to him than a pebble or twig on the side of the road. Kyle would have preferred not to have to see the duke at all, but the high command, knowing the relationship between the Ettman and Herhardt families, had done Kyle the dubious favor of assigning him to the same unit. So now Kyle would have to spend the whole war as a subordinate of the man he hated.

With well-practiced movements, Kyle unwrapped the bandage. When he saw what was underneath, his frown deepened. As it turned out, the officer with the bullet wound was not the one who was screaming in pain over a bit of shrapnel, but rather the calm, quiet Matthias von Herhardt. Kyle managed to remove the bullet, but the wound remained.

“I think you're going to need stitches,” Kyle said, with an expression that showed mixed emotions.

Matthias, meanwhile, was just as unemotional as always. Nodding, he replied, “As you wish.”

# Chapter 123:
## That Name

“You don't find that painful at all?” Kyle impulsively asked after he finished applying the antiseptic to the duke's wound.

The surgeons had been summoned away to other barracks, and the other officers had all left after being treated, leaving Kyle and the duke by themselves.

Kyle wasn't asking out of concern for the duke's pain. He was just taken aback by the way that, even with a bullet wound in his arm, the duke was acting as calm and indifferent as if he had been witnessing a stranger's misfortune.

The duke stared at him without saying anything in response. There was a faint smile on his lips. It took all of Kyle's self-restraint to keep himself from jamming the scissors in his hand into the duke's neck.

Here on the war front, the duke seemed like a completely different person from the man Kyle had seen the last time he was at Arvis.

Or rather, the duke seemed to have returned to his usual self.

When Kyle had heard his father expressing worry about the duke's health, he had felt a glimmer of hope. Perhaps the duke was finally feeling some modicum of guilt over his treatment of Layla. It wasn't any of Kyle's business, but he still hoped this was the case, for Layla's sake. If the duke, whom he knew she loved, was still remorseless, Kyle would feel very sorry for her. However, it now appeared that he was still wholly unrepentant.

Once he finished stitching up the wound, Kyle took a step back, gritting his teeth to suppress his anger. The duke casually lowered his sleeve and stood up, then poured some brandy into a glass and turned around. He looked less like a soldier in the middle of a war than like the upper-class gentleman he had always been.

“Shall I pour you a glass?” he asked.

Kyle almost burst into laughter. “You and I aren't exactly the type to drink and have a good time, Major.”

“Then let's drink and have a bad time.”

Kyle frowned. *Is he messing with me?*

Looking amused, the duke smiled as he poured a second glass and handed it to him.

Out of anger, Kyle downed the glass in one gulp. The strong brandy burned his throat the whole way down.

“You're in quite a good mood for someone with a bullet wound, Major.”

“Of course I am.” The duke set his glass down after taking a sip, then slowly put his coat back on. “We're almost to Sienne,” he added in a soft voice.

*That bastard,* Kyle thought, shuddering, as he set down his empty glass.

The duke then finished his glass as well. Even though his wound had to be quite painful, he was showing no sign of suffering, other than slightly slower movements than normal.

It appeared that the outstanding gentleman was also an outstanding soldier. He slept well, ate well, and killed well. The fact that he had been promoted from captain to major only a few months after joining the war attested to his great skill.

Sometimes he seemed truly elated. At such times, Kyle could understand why the enemy soldiers called him a demon. It seemed that Kyle wasn't alone in this impression, either, as other soldiers seemed to have a hard time relating to him. Even his superior officers seemed to fear him.

Regardless, though, he was a capable commander, and going into battle with him meant a better chance of coming back alive. For that alone, he was afforded definite respect and recognition. Although, of course, he himself didn't seem to care about this at all.

*Then what's he so pleased about?* Kyle wondered, but he couldn't think of any reason why the duke should be happy that they were nearing Sienne.

In truth, “happy” didn't feel like the right word for it. The duke's mood seemed strangely lifted, but he still looked cold and serious. Kyle was just glad that he didn't have to face him as an enemy. If the duke kept his spirits up like this, by the war's end, the Herhardt family would likely have contributed another hero to the annals of the Berg Empire.

“You can go,” the duke said, signaling the end of their short conversation.

Kyle brusquely saluted him and left. As he walked along the dark road, crickets chirping all around him, he looked up at the starry, foreign sky and prayed. First he prayed for Layla's safety. Then he prayed that the next bullet would pierce the duke's heart.

* * *

It was after midnight when people finally started emerging from the church basement where they had taken shelter. Now that the air raid had ceased, the city was enveloped in serene darkness. Even amid the darkness, however, an ominous atmosphere remained, emanating from the bell tower in the square, which had been destroyed in the bombing.

“I can't believe that really happened,” Bill muttered.

While the Berg army was advancing by land, word had circulated that Beloff, one of the other great powers of the Northern Alliance, was going to use a fleet to blockade and bombard Sienne by sea. Not wanting to believe this, most had dismissed it as a lie spread by the enemy, but now the sad truth was plain to see.

“At least those Beloff bastards did us one favor. Now that noisy bell won't be bothering us anymore,” Bill said, trying to lighten the mood since Layla still looked frightened.

She pushed up her glasses and looked at the ruined tower, then giggled weakly, which he was happy to hear.

“You're right,” she replied, trying to smile even though her heart was still pounding anxiously. “And I was just getting used to it. I'm going to miss that thing.”

At first, they had thought that they had lucked out in finding a nice, clean apartment for a surprisingly low rent. It hadn't taken them long to figure out why the rent was so low, however. It had been because of the bell tower in the square. Each hour, the bell had rung out at an ear-splitting volume. But now, the bell tower was gone. Now they had a cheap and quiet apartment. Taking this lighthearted perspective brought them some relief.

"All right then, get on my back. Let's go home," Bill said, crouching down for her.

Only then realizing that she didn't have her shoes on, Layla looked frustrated. "No! I can walk. These are thick socks."

"Don't be ridiculous. Get on my back. If you keep at this, we'll be out on the street all night."

"No, really! I want to walk. I'm going to walk. I don't think I'll be able to sleep unless I walk. Okay?"

While they were frantically fleeing the air raid, she had realized some things that she had been ignoring.

She wasn't wearing her support belt, and her dress was made of a thin material. She had intentionally bought clothes that were a bit large for her, but she was worried it was still plain to see.

*I should tell him. I know that. But how do I spring it on him here, in this situation?*

Just as she thought she was about to burst into tears from the guilt, Uncle Bill stood up, brushing himself off, and casually said, "Fine. You sure are a stubborn one."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Bill."

"What are you sorry for? Are you sure you'll be all right?"

He looked down at her woolen socks with concern. She started walking confidently forward to reassure him. He laughed and nodded at her approvingly.

They slowly walked down the street, holding hands. Besides the square's bell tower, the other buildings hadn't suffered much damage. Layla commented that the Beloff fighter pilots were just as incompetent as the chef at the restaurant across from their

apartment building, which made Bill laugh heartily. They both tried to keep smiling as much as they could.

“They won't be back, so don't worry,” he lied.

“Okay, I won't worry,” she replied, joining in on the lie.

The crickets chirped in the darkness as they continued towards home.

“Uncle Bill?”

“Yeah?”

“How about we name things that we like while we walk?”

“Things we like?”

“Yeah. Thinking about things we like will make us feel better. Let's take turns.”

“What's this nonsense?”

“I'll start. First for me is... you, Uncle Bill!”

Her face seemed to glow under the starry sky.

“All right,” he replied, “then for me it'll be... our family's child.”

“Child? You mean me? I've been all grown up for a long time now.”

“All grown up? Phooey. You've still got a long way to go, kiddo.”

The quiet summer night was filled with the sound of various other things she liked, with which he was also quite familiar: birds... flowers... trees... ice cream... mystery novels... the first snow of winter.

Each time it was Bill's turn, however, he kept returning to the same response: Layla... Layla... Layla.

She was the treasure of his life.

“That's cheating, Uncle Bill! You can't keep giving the same answer.”

Despite her complaint, that name was the only response he could honestly give.

He had heard the news of the air raid while walking home from work. As he frantically ran home and pulled Layla into his arms, he had realized that he felt like her parent.

As long as she survived, he didn't mind dying. If the chance arose

to give his life in order to save hers, he would happily take it without hesitation. As long as she could live a good life, he didn't care if he lived or died.

His eyes shook as he looked at her. The calm, innocent look on her face made his heart sting even more.

Before she could look up and see his expression, he quickly raised his head and looked forward.

He had a very strange feeling, but he wasn't sure why. Was it because of the cruel world that was trying to kill this poor girl? Was it because of himself, and his failure to be a decent father to her? Or was it because of his regret over fleeing Arvis without getting a chance to kill the duke...?

“Uncle Bill?” she said, squeezing his hand.

He snapped out of his daze and saw that they had made it to the apartment building. Not liking the nervous look that she was giving him, he forced another hearty laugh.

“It was just like you said, Layla. Talking about those silly things made me feel much better,” he said, lying once again.

“Me too, Uncle Bill.”

Luckily, she didn't seem to realize he was lying. She smiled at him. As always, her smile was very pretty.

* * *

When word came that the advance cavalry battalion had secured the bridges and roads, an order was given to all brigades that had been divided into the north and the east to advance.

The infantry company led by Major Herhardt was tasked with breaching the center of the enemy fortress after an artillery bombardment. When the sound of the mortars breaking the fortress walls stopped, it was their cue to advance.

Matthias gazed at the sky ahead, which was full of dense clouds of dust. The sound of the huge siege mortars tearing down the walls of the fortress had been loud even from the distant location where his infantry were waiting. Each time a mortar shell flew and hit its

target, another section vanished from the stone wall which had guarded the city for ages. Once the fortress fell, it would be their gateway straight into Sienne. They might be able to capture the city in as little as two weeks, or a month at most.

“I think they've just about finished!” a scout shouted as he looked through binoculars at the fortress under artillery fire.

The infantrymen started to feel tense as their time to fight drew close. At once, they all turned to look at their company commander. The heavy silence was soon pierced by the blaring note of a bugle, signaling the beginning of their assault.

With no shift in his facial expression, Matthias immediately started marching. His company's mission was to head behind the fortress, annihilate any enemy soldiers lying in ambush, and plant the imperial flag on the newly occupied territory. If their mission was a success, the next flag they planted would be in Sienne.

A faint smile appeared on Matthias's lips as he muttered, *Layla.* However, his eyes remained serious as they looked southward towards the distant spot that he had to occupy.

Not long earlier, they had received word that Beloff's combat planes had carried out an air raid on Sienne. The other Berg soldiers had rejoiced at the news of a successful raid, but Matthias's heart had sunk.

Layla had to survive until he could find her and kill her. Until then, he didn't want anyone touching her, whether they were an ally or an enemy, or even God Himself.

Thus, Matthias planned to go to her as quickly as possible, even if that meant becoming a monster, or a demon.

# Chapter 124:
## One Goal

The soldiers' boots pounded in perfect rhythm as they ran across the bridge.

As he awaited the troops, who had split into two groups on either side of the fortress's gates, Matthias climbed up onto a portion of the wall that was still standing. Standing amid the thick smell of mortar smoke and enemy soldiers' blood, he looked down at the town below.

He swiftly scanned the ruined roads and buildings, before halting his gaze on the town's chapel. Its spire and roof had been blown off, but its walls were still standing strong, as if they had been protected from the mortar shells by God. It was of course a place that the deeply religious Lovitan soldiers adored, and likely many of them were hiding inside.

Stepping over the corpses of the enemy soldiers who had been killed in the artillery assault, he ran down the remains of the stone wall. At his command, the scattered members of his company quickly and cautiously began to surround the chapel.

Matthias, who did not believe in God, pulled the pin from a grenade and tossed it through a broken stained-glass window, thus starting the battle. Right on cue, he heard screams from inside, and soon, panicked enemy soldiers began to flee from the building. Matthias raised his gun and took aim at them.

The ringing of the bell in the still-standing bell tower began to fill the streets, along with the sound of gunfire.

* * *

The museum shut down. This was only to be expected, and yet it came as a surprisingly large shock to Layla. This was less because she had lost her job, and more because it was a frightening sign that the war was reaching every corner of the city.

Without trying to, her mind kept entertaining terrifying possibilities. What if there was another air raid? What would happen if the Berg army really occupied Sienne? When would the war end?

Feeling despair at these unanswerable questions, she eventually fell asleep. She was awoken again by the feeling of Uncle Bill gently caressing her furrowed brow.

“Uncle Bill...?”

“Sorry, Layla. I wasn't trying to wake you.”

“Oh, it's fine.” She smiled as she grabbed his hand before he could pull it away. “Did you get off work early? It's not evening yet.”

“I thought I'd stop by here on my lunch break. I brought something for you.”

He bashfully pointed at a paper bag he had set down on her bedside table. Detecting the faint scent of fresh peaches, she started beaming.

“You brought me a gift?!”

“A gift? It's just some peaches,” he muttered, though it was clear that he was delighted by her reaction.

In the middle of work that morning, he had suddenly thought of Layla. Ever since the air raid, the museum had been closed, and she had been spending every day alone in the apartment. She hadn't admitted it, but he could sense that she was very lonely and nervous.

He wished that he could do something, anything, for her—end the war, make her dreams come true, reunite her with her love. He would do all those things if he were able to, but all he could do at this point was bring her a few peaches.

“I want you to eat one of these while I'm gone. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Don't just say that. I really want you to start eating well again. The more chaotic things get around here, the more important it is for you to eat plenty of food to keep up your strength. I want you to

eat lots and lots, like a cow. Okay?" he asked, raising his voice. He had noticed that she was looking especially gaunt today.

"Of course!" she replied, giggling as she nodded profusely.

The expression on her face reminded him of when she was a little girl.

"I don't know if I can eat quite as much as a cow, but I'll eat a lot, Uncle Bill."

"Good. That's a good girl. When I come back this evening, I'll bring lots more delicious food for you."

"Wow! Are we having a party?"

"A party? Well... sure. Let's have a party."

He smiled as he petted her hair.

"I have something to tell you, so I'll wait until our party tonight."

"All right! I have something to tell you, too," she replied, firmly grasping his hand to steel her resolve.

She was planning to tell him everything tonight. She didn't want to chicken out anymore.

"I'll be back in no time, kiddo. Get some rest and I'll see you this evening." Smiling brightly, he turned to leave.

Just as he was about to close the door to her room, she shouted, "Uncle Bill! Uncle Bill!"

Startled, he quickly turned back around, and saw that she was giggling like a mischievous child.

"Just kidding! Stay safe out there, and I'll see you this evening, Uncle Bill."

Having put her glasses back on to see his face, she waved goodbye.

"I see you're still a little kid," he grumbled before waving back at her. "See you soon, kiddo."

* * *

Another bullet hit its mark. The enemy officer, who had been shooting at Berg soldiers until a moment earlier, collapsed to the ground before the smoke had stopped rising from the barrel of his

gun. Major Herhardt lowered his gun. His face showed no particular expression.

“Over there! They're running away!” shouted a soldier who had been searching the streets after the battle.

Two soldiers in Lovitan uniforms were fleeing as fast as they could towards the street corner. Noticing that there was a warhorse waiting at the stop towards which they were running, Matthias narrowed his eyes.

Rather than chasing after the soldiers, he raised his gun again and pointed it in the direction of the horse. More precisely, he aimed at the window of the store the horse was standing in front of.

Startled by the sound of the glass breaking behind it, the horse started galloping away. As the soldiers who had planned to make their getaway on that horse floundered, Berg soldiers caught up and surrounded them.

Matthias gave a hand signal to tell them to wait, and then he started approaching. There was a middle-aged man looking at the sky with a distraught look on his face. He was a general and was the commander of the fortress's defense force. Stopping in front of the group, Matthias nodded courteously to the enemy general. “This battle is over,” he said in Lovitan, which he spoke fluently but with a thick accent. “Wouldn't you agree?”

The general let out a deep sigh. If he surrendered, the battle would be over. The remaining Lovitan soldiers would become prisoners, but at least their lives would be spared. However, if they let the Berg soldiers take the fortress, what would become of Sienne?

He mulled over this dilemma, even while he knew he had no real choice. Meanwhile, the officer who had been quietly seething next to him took out his gun.

Noticing this, a Berg soldier shouted, “Major!”

A gunshot rang out.

* * *

Even though she had no appetite, Layla got up and ate one of the peaches Uncle Bill had bought for her. As soon as the sweet juice touched her taste buds, her hunger came rushing back to her.

*Should I eat another one? Or should I save it?*

She looked pensively at the basket containing the remaining peaches. When she finally made up her mind and picked up another peach, she heard a familiar, booming noise outside. Startled, she dropped the peach and it rolled under the table.

In her shock, she vainly thought, *No, it was just my imagination. I'm just hearing things because I've been so afraid...*

Before she could finish her thought, however, she started screaming instinctively.

The explosions were getting so close, she could feel the vibration in her body. It seemed like the floor was starting to shake, and soon she heard the sound of objects in the apartment falling and breaking.

She crawled under the table and hunched up into a ball. Her heart was pounding furiously.

Instead of sobbing with fear, she tried to remember what she had learned: *"When there's an air raid, leave the apartment building and seek shelter in the nearest basement."*

*I can do it,* she thought. *I'll go to the church basement again, just like Uncle Bill said. Yes. I just have to run out of here and make it to there, and I'll be safe.*

As the sound of windows breaking across the street started to ring out, she emerged from under the table and ran frantically towards the apartment's front door. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see combat planes flying in the sky outside. The roofs of the buildings across the street were half destroyed.

Gritting her teeth, she started hurrying down the stairway with quivering legs.

* * *

In the silence following the gunshot, one man fell to the ground,

dead. Dark blood flowed out of his head, staining the dirt. His still-open eyes looked like bottomless pits. His gun, which he hadn't had the chance to fire, was soon soaked in his own blood.

Matthias looked down at him. There was no expression on his face, which was splattered with the blood of the man he had just killed. When the smoke had cleared from the barrel of his gun, he put it back in its holster, and then looked at the general again. Several of the other soldiers gulped nervously.

“This battle is over,” Matthias said, repeating his earlier statement exactly. He extended his hand towards the frightened-looking general, as if he wanted to shake his hand.

“Dear God...” the general muttered, looking up at the sky before shutting his eyes. After a moment, he opened his eyes again and resignedly placed his baton in the outstretched hand of young Berg officer standing before him.

A general's surrender—it was an official acknowledgment of defeat. It wouldn't be long before a Berg flag would be flying on the Sienne shore.

The general's bloodshot eyes filled with tears. Matthias, who had been watching him from a step away, bowed politely. The Lovitan general returned the gesture.

“Sorry about him,” Matthias said, glancing down at the dead officer before turning away. It was quite a dry, calm tone with which to talk about a person he had just killed.

Matthias and the other soldiers with him took the Lovitan general, who was now their prisoner, and entered the town square.

The rest of the Berg soldiers cheered loudly when they saw them. To Matthias, however, the whole thing felt like something from a distant world that had nothing to do with him. Victory, glory, honor—they all felt meaningless to him now, as they had since the war had begun. From the start, he had only ever had one goal, and victory was merely a means of reaching that goal.

*Layla,* he muttered. Little by little, he was getting closer to her.

He raised the enemy general's baton and declared victory. As

soon as he did, the Lovita flag was lowered from the flagpole in the square, and the flag of the Berg Empire was raised in its place.

Even as the enemy general was offering his congratulations, Matthias's mind thought of nothing but Layla. Even if he had lost her forever, she would be forever his.

Layla was safe. He was sure of it. Of course, it was ridiculous for him to have such certainty. They were in the middle of a war. Anyone could die at any moment. No one could guarantee the safety of a fragile, defenseless woman living in a city that was being constantly bombarded by air raids.

However, it wasn't just any woman, it was Layla. His Layla. Thus, she was safe. It was a matter of faith for him. He needed no evidence to know it was true.

As the citizens started to come out from hiding and gather in the town square one by one, Matthias announced that the occupation forces would guarantee the safety of the citizens, as long as they didn't commit any hostile actions or put up pointless resistance.

Standing at the edge of the podium, he looked up at the evening sky as a flock of birds took flight. A faint smile appeared on his bloodstained face.

They were almost to Sienne.

# Chapter 125:
## It Will Never Stop Being True

Even once it was clear that the bombing had stopped, no one was eager to go outside.

As if the previous air raid had been just a warning, this time Beloff's planes had showered the city with much more ferocity. From the basement, there was no way to know what things looked like up at ground level, but it was clear that the damage would far exceed a single fallen bell tower like last time.

A baby started to cry, breaking the tense silence in the dark, stuffy basement. A number of small children then started crying as well, soon followed by the sound of adults sighing in exasperation.

Layla rubbed her cold hands together and tried to catch her breath. Her stomach, which felt like it was tied up in a knot, gradually started to relax as well. Just as she was regaining her composure, she became suddenly aware of an intense pain in her knee.

She couldn't remember clearly how she had gotten to where she was now. After barely managing to make it out of the apartment building, she had found the street packed with people panicking over the attack. Someone had then bumped into her and she had fallen to the ground, losing her glasses. Just as she had found them and put them on again, another deafening explosion had rung out from a nearby street.

Ignoring the blood flowing from her scraped knee, she had started running, not stopping until she had safely reached the church basement. It wasn't clear to her how much time had passed since then, or what had happened in that time.

"We can go back up now! The planes are gone!" shouted a young man who had gone upstairs to see the state of things at ground level.

Even after hearing this, however, no one moved. After a short

feeling of relief, the basement was filled with even louder cries and sighs.

Layla was the first to get up. She walked over towards the staircase, where a dim lamp was burning.

*I have to find Uncle Bill.*

This was the first thought that came to her mind when she regained her senses.

“Are you going to be all right?” a man asked her, noticing that she was alone.

She nodded and hurried up to the street. The smell of dust and explosives permeated the clear night air. Smoke was drifting from the remains of ruined buildings all around It appeared that the seaside village and harbor had been hit even more heavily than the city.

She took off her glasses with quivering hands. After rubbing her eyes vigorously, she put her glasses back on, but the scene before her had not changed at all. One of the lenses of her glasses was cracked, but she didn't mind. In this moment, she preferred not seeing things with too much clarity.

*Uncle Bill probably took shelter somewhere around the harbor. Should I go look for him there? Or would it be better to go back to the apartment and wait for him there?*

After dithering for a moment, she started walking back to the apartment. She was missing a shoe, but she didn't care.

*If I can just find Uncle Bill, everything will be all right. So I just have to get to-*

“Layla!”

Just as she was drawing close to the apartment building, she heard a familiar voice. Turning to look, she saw Allen, the man who had helped her and Uncle Bill find their apartment. He worked at the harbor with Uncle Bill, but for some reason he was alone.

“Where's Uncle Bill? Did he go up into the apartment already?” she asked, limping towards him. “You and he must have evacuated together, right? I was worried, but I'm so glad to see you. Uncle Bill

is up in the apartment, right? He must be so worried about me. I'd better go see him." She was speaking faster than normal.

Allen finally broke his silence, saying, "Layla, don't be too shocked when I tell you this." His voice cracked as soon as he started speaking.

The world seemed to start spinning, but Layla kept her eyes fixed on Allen.

"Bill is... well, he's in the hospital." The tears he had been holding back started to fall. "You've got to go to him, Layla. Right now!"

* * *

Hearing a vague buzzing in his ears, Bill opened his eyes. For some reason, his vision was blurry, and he felt like he was submerged in deep water. Eventually he would feel horrible pain throughout his whole body, as if all of his bones were broken. At this point, though, he could hardly feel a thing.

"Uncle Bill! Uncle Bill!"

The hazy buzzing noise in his ears was pierced by the sound of Layla breathlessly sobbing and calling his name. He turned his head and looked in the direction the sound was coming from. Strangely, he wasn't able to move any other part of his body, but he could manage to turn his head.

*Layla... Why is she crying like that?* He wanted to console her, but he couldn't get his voice to come out properly. Seeing people in white clothes busily walking to and fro, he could tell that he was in a hospital. *Oh, yeah, maybe I did get hurt a little.*

His memories abruptly cut off after the explosion at the harbor warehouse.

He had been carrying a box of mortar shells to a warship. There had been an evacuation order, and all the workers had started running frantically. Going with the flow of the crowd, he had run straight across the warehouse. Just as he thought he had made it outside, a deafening noise had rung out, as if the sky were falling. It

had reminded him of the noise the mansion's generator had made when it exploded.

*If only I hadn't broken that damn thing, I wouldn't have made Layla do the things she did,* he had suddenly thought with regret. He had then felt a great deal of pain, before losing consciousness. He had no other memories after that point, other than the vague sensation of being buried underneath something.

*Don't cry, Layla.*

Layla was now struggling and wailing. He could see that she was holding his hand, but he couldn't feel a thing.

*I'd better get up,* he decided. However, no matter how he tried, his body wouldn't cooperate with his will.

Meanwhile, the doctor ran over and pulled Layla away from him, then said something to her, after which she froze.

*Stupid doctor, what sort of nonsense is he scaring her with?*

The image of Layla's frightened, no longer crying face painfully imprinted itself into Bill's wavering consciousness.

*Just because he's a doctor doesn't mean he knows anything. It's all right, Layla. This is nothing.*

He opened his lips to laugh, but all that came out was a faint moan and the sound of his labored breathing.

* * *

"I'm sorry."

This was the doctor's response after Layla desperately urged him to operate on Bill right away, crying as she promised that she would find a way to pay the surgery bill.

"There's no point in operating on him in his current state. It's a miracle that he's held on to this point at all."

*What is he saying?* Layla shook her head, unable to understand what the doctor was getting at.

After being taken to the hospital, she had found Uncle Bill lying in a bed, covered with blood and bruises. A doctor had told her that he had been severely injured when the waterfront warehouse he

was working in collapsed during the air raid.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Nor could she accept what the doctor was telling her.

“N-no. Y-you must be mistaken,” she stammered.

“I think he was waiting for his daughter to arrive.”

“Don't say that. Doctor, you need to operate on him right away, please...”

“You should say your final farewell to him before it's too late,” the doctor said, avoiding Layla's gaze.

Layla's legs started to give out. A nurse rushed over to help her stay standing.

Brushing the nurse away, Layla limped over to Bill's bedside and started wailing like an injured animal.

“Uncle Bill! You can hear me, right? G-get up, right now! Let's go home, okay?”

As she cried and clung to him, Bill managed to open his eyes. Sobs and moans flowed from his lips as he weakly twisted his injured body, trying to get up somehow. Eventually the doctor couldn't stand by and watch anymore. He rushed towards them and pulled Layla from his side.

“If you keep saying things like that, you'll make his final moments even worse. I know it's hard, but the best thing to do right now is try to help him pass on in comfort.”

*His final moments...?*

When she heard that phrase, the tears stopped falling from her eyes, and she became aware of a truth that she desperately wanted to deny. Perhaps she had been vaguely aware of this truth the moment she had first entered the hospital room and seen him.

Gasping like a choking person, she staggered back to the bedside. Smiling and crying at once, she looked at Uncle Bill.

* * *

“You always said that you knew I would become an outstanding adult. You still think so, right? You still believe in me?”

*Does she really have to ask?*

Bill almost burst into laughter at Layla's obvious question. Instead, however, all that came out as a series of burning coughs, after which some sort of hot liquid started seeping out of his mouth.

A nurse rushed over and put a towel to his mouth. Layla looked away for a moment. When she looked back, she was smiling even more brightly, while even thicker tears ran down her cheeks.

“If you believe in me, I can do anything. Thanks to you, Uncle Bill, I am an outstanding adult now, and I'm making a good life for myself.”

As Bill slipped in and out of consciousness, he heard Layla's faint voice as she continued to speak to him. At the same time, short memories of days past kept flashing through his mind.

He recalled the spring day when he was planting rose seedlings, and a little girl had arrived riding in the mail coach. All the days he had spent with her seemed to be infused with the fresh scent of flowers and herbs. Every single day with her had been beautiful.

*I can't let this happen.* He twisted his body with all his might. *I can't leave her alone in this cruel world. I can't...*

“Uncle Bill!”

A few men in white clothes ran over and grabbed him. Layla put her little hand to his cheek. Tears flowed from his eyes, wetting her hand like rain on a flower petal.

“I was so happy when you wanted to be my family, Uncle Bill. I was full of joy, every day. Truly. We were always a real family, and we will keep being one, right?”

Bill's eyes filled with tears.

*Of course. Of course we will.*

He wanted to respond to her, but her face was gradually growing hazy.

“If we're born again in another life, I'll find you and become part of your family again. It will just be a brief parting, and then a reunion.” She pressed her lips against his bushy beard. Amid her sobs, she whispered, “I love you, Dad.”

He was barely hanging onto consciousness now, but he heard the last thing she whispered loud and clear. As he stopped his painful struggling, a sad smile spread across his bloodstained lips.

Suddenly he remembered a leisurely summer evening, perhaps the same year she had first come to him. They had walked through the woods and along the riverside. The breeze had shaken the little girl's hair and clothes as she walked alongside him, reciting the names of flowers and trees that he had taught her.

She had excitedly run a short distance ahead, picked up a shiny pebble and a white feather, and slowly walked back to his side. Then she had furtively placed her hand into his huge hand. Her tiny hand had felt very warm as it struggled to wrap around his, only making it around a couple of his fingers.

She had looked up at him with hesitation, but when he had chuckled, she had started smiling shyly and squeezed his hand more tightly. They had continued to walk along the riverside until the purple twilight had given way to darkness.

*Yes, that's when I knew it.*

All of a sudden, he realized something that he had known in the back of his mind for a long time, but had been too embarrassed to admit to himself.

Just then, as if God had changed His mind, Bill was able to utter a single sentence: “I... love you.”

*There we go. That wasn't so hard now, was it?*

Along with a deep sense of relief, he could then feel the energy quickly draining from his body. W*hen I wake up, first thing I'll do is go buy a bunch of tasty food. We did say we were going to have a party. Her and me. I have so much to tell her, too. Maybe we'll stay up all night, drinking and chatting and having a good time. Well, maybe not drinking. She can't have alcohol anymore, so I'd better get some apple juice or something instead. We can clink our glasses together, just like the day we first became a family.*

Smiling, Bill whispered again, “I love you, my daughter.”

*When I wake up, maybe I'll be embarrassed I said that, but oh well.*

*It's not so bad. After all, it's true. And it will never stop being true.*

# Chapter 126:
## A Beautiful Day

News about Sienne's fall spread quickly throughout the city. Posters announcing the imminent arrival of the occupying forces were posted in various spots.

Layla hurried towards a street corner where a murmuring crowd of people was gathered in front of a notice board. The message on the poster was more or less what she had expected. It indicated that all weapons and communication equipment were to be rendered to the authorities, and that it was strictly forbidden for anyone to slander or attack the occupation forces. The overall message was that unconditional surrender and compliance were the only way to survive. It also indicated that no one was allowed to leave the city without a pass authorized by the general of the occupying forces.

The others in the crowd were clearly agitated, showing signs of fear, despair, and anger, but Layla was in a daze. She felt nothing particular about what she had just read. The war felt irrelevant, as did everything in her life.

After being pushed aside by other people eager to read the notice, she trudged back home. She had been in this state ever since Uncle Bill's funeral. Each day had passed by indifferently, as if she were dreaming. She felt like a dried-up plant in a discarded flowerpot.

She knew she couldn't go on like this, but she couldn't help it. It took all her willpower just to muster the strength to visit Uncle Bill's grave once a day.

She plodded up the steps and entered her apartment, then stood for a long while, feeling the breeze blowing in through the windows, which had been broken in the air raid.

The sky was clear and blue. There was yellow dust floating amid the crisp autumn sunlight. By all appearances it was a beautiful day, but she felt nothing but utter loneliness.

To resist acknowledging the fact that she was once again completely alone in life, she shouted, “Uncle Bill!” After a moment, she forced a smile and shouted again even louder: “Uncle Bill!!”

She imagined hearing his heavy steps as he walked up the stairs and opened the door. For a moment, she could almost hear him laughing and greeting her: *“Hi, Layla!”* However, the apartment was filled with nothing but oppressive silence.

Suddenly she missed the fallen bell tower. Its deafening ringing would have made things a little more bearable. In fact, any sound would have been preferable to this silence.

She felt like running out of the apartment but lacked the energy to do so. Instead, she went to her room and flopped down on the bed. Her bedroom window was the only one that hadn't completely broken in the air raid, but it had been cracked, and it was only a matter of time before it would break.

*I need to go buy some new window panes. But is that even possible in the current situation? What will I do when winter rolls around?*

She lay motionless like a doll, staring into space as thought after thought passed through her mind.

Then it occurred to her that she was out of food as well. Her last meal had been some stale bread that she had choked down two days earlier. Suddenly she was hit with a wave of intense hunger, but she lacked the willpower to get up.

The threat of the occupying army's imminent arrival had thrown the city into disarray. On the way back from the cemetery she had passed by the grocery store. It had looked like a battlefield, with desperate citizens fighting over the little that was remained. She had no intention of entering into that fray, but she also knew that it would be irresponsible to simply starve. It was then that she remembered what Allen had given to her.

The weekend after Bill's funeral, Allen and his family had left Sienne. He had told Layla that they were headed to the capital, which was still safe, before the arrival of the Berg army would make travel impossible.

He had apologized to her repeatedly, telling her how sorry he was for leaving her alone in Sienne. However, Layla didn't blame him. She was just the adopted daughter of a distant relative of his who had shown up out of the blue one day. The kindness he had shown her already was enough for her see him as a good person. She didn't expect him to take her along with him when he was struggling to escape with his family.

Anyway, she had no desire to leave the city. No matter where she went, she could never be by Uncle Bill's side like she wanted. Seeing Allen unable to lift his head and face her made her feel even more guilty.

Before leaving Sienne, he had stopped by the apartment to bid farewell to her, and had given her a large bundle of necessities—food, fabric, and various odds and ends. She had felt very grateful for this and had thanked him profusely. He had stared back at her for a moment, rubbing his bloodshot eyes, then left. With that, yet another good person had departed from her life.

She took a jar of pickled apricots from the bundle. She carefully avoided looking at the small box full of Uncle Bill's belongings from the warehouse. She felt like if she were to look inside that box, things would really be over.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, she ravenously ate all the apricots in the jar, not even thinking to move them to a dish first. Wiping the sticky juice from her mouth with the back of her hand, she started laughing bitterly. She was still hungry and sleepy, and she hated herself for still wanting to live.

* * *

Sienne's last line of defense fell far more easily than expected. The fortress had been the last thread of hope for the Lovita army. Once the soldiers learned that it had been destroyed, they lost all their morale. After conducting a formal defensive battle, they retreated, giving up a key strategic point in the south. The decision to retreat was a wise one. If they had continued fighting to protect

the already-crumbling frontline, the capital's defenses would have been put at risk of collapse.

The Berg troops passed through the wide-open city gates and advanced towards the square. The cavalry led the way, followed by a procession of military vehicles carrying the general and other commanding officers.

Sienne's mayor stood meekly at the gates, greeting the occupying army with a white flag. The city's safety had been guaranteed as long as they accepted the terms of the occupying army and surrendered unconditionally. This seemed to be their only option.

Matthias took in the unfamiliar city from his seat in the back of a military vehicle following behind the cavalry. All around there was rubble from buildings destroyed in the air raid, and yet Sienne seemed generally calm and peaceful. Perhaps this was an illusion created by the clear sunlight, and the fact that the color palette of Lovita's environment was much brighter than Berg's.

The army proceeded slowly through the city, as if they were appreciating the spoils of the war, before coming to a stop at the square.

The general got out of his vehicle and went up to the platform that had been erected in front of City Hall. The other commanding officers followed in a line behind him. Matthias walked with leisurely steps in this line, loosely holding his officers cap. When he reached the top step up to the platform, he gently placed the cap on his head. Dressed in his blue-gray uniform, he looked clean and elegant, not at all befitting the brutal nicknames he had been given since joining the war.

In a powerful voice, the general began his lengthy speech. It was a ritual he had repeated each time they had occupied an enemy city, but today he was showing much more passion than usual. He seemed quite excited about having reached the goal ahead of schedule, but Matthias wasn't especially happy about this. However, under such a beautiful autumn sky, he felt like he could accept anything.

His heart was full of a generosity and composure he had not felt previously. It had been like this since the moment he had first set foot in Sienne. And why shouldn't it be? This was where Layla was, after all.

Standing with proper military posture, he looked down from the platform at the countless people gathered below. While his eyes looked fierce, as though he were a predator searching for prey, his lips held a tender smile, as though he were facing his love.

This contradictory expression seemed to be mildly disturbing the officers around him, but he didn't care. In fact, he seemed completely uninterested in how they were feeling. It was a strange atmosphere. He felt like he had sunken into an abyss, and yet also felt vaguely elevated.

After the long speech finally concluded, the crowd started to disperse from the square. Removing his officer's cap again and holding it in his hand, Matthias slowly descended from the platform. His slicked-back hair was as flawlessly neat as his uniform.

Having regained his health on the battlefield, he was back to his usual appearance. The fact that he had entered the war in a weakened state and then grown stronger and healthier day by day had greatly contributed to his notoriety.

Just as he had reached the bottom of the stairs, an aide came running up to him, shouting, “Major, I found it!” He had a look on his face like that of a proud student who had just completed his homework.

Matthias slowly turned to face him.

As the major's shadow fell upon him, the aide flinched and took a step back. Viewed from afar, he looked slender, but up close it was clear that he was not only tall but imposingly muscular. The deep blue of his eyes always caused a chill to run down the aide's spine, just as it was doing this time. “S-so, as you requested...”

“Where is she?” Matthias asked, urging him on in a relaxed tone of voice.

The aide hurriedly handed him a note with an address written on it. “This is the location of the home of Layla Llewellyn, the young woman who moved here from Berg last spring.”

* * *

Layla finally got out of bed in the early afternoon, after lying there like a corpse all morning. She ate a small amount of boiled beans with some stale rye bread, and drank some hot water with sugar. It wasn't enough to fill her belly, but it was enough to get her moving.

By the time she had bathed and gotten dressed, the sun was shining warmly. Standing in front of the broken window, she looked down at the street. It was unusually quiet, perhaps because the occupying forces had entered the city. Even though their safety had been guaranteed, the citizens of Sienne still feared the enemy army.

She put on some thick socks, then put on her shoes and tied the laces securely. It was warm outside, so she decided not to wear a shawl. As she emerged from the apartment building, her steps were as calm as ever.

The sunlight, which seemed especially bright today, dazzled her eyes as she stepped out onto the empty street.

*Would it be better not to go?* she wondered, noticing that there was no one else around. After deliberating for a moment, however, she started walking.

She was more afraid of the suffocating silence inside her apartment than the occupying forces. Normally, the noise of the street made her feel better, but not today.

*It's going to be all right,* she told herself. To calm herself down, she tried to think about the things she liked. However, she quickly realized that she was unable to bring their names to her mind.

Just as she was starting to chuckle about this, she heard the sound of footsteps approaching.

Not seeing anyone's shadow but her own, she quickly turned her head in the direction of the sound. There was a military officer

slowly walking towards her. The sun was behind him, so she could only make out his silhouette. When he saw her, he stopped walking, and the street was silent again.

*Is there a curfew or something?* she wondered. Her dazed, distracted mind soon regained its focus, and she started to feel afraid.

For whatever reason, the officer just stood there, staring at her. Even though he was quite far away and she couldn't see his face, she could feel his intense gaze.

Her heart started pounding uneasily and her breath quickened when she realized the source of her fear: there was something familiar about him. As impossible as it seemed, the officer standing at the end of the road felt very familiar to her.

Suddenly the face of a man she hadn't thought about in a while flashed into her mind. This greatly increased her fear, and she turned and started walking quickly away from the dark figure. Watching her hurry away, the officer started walking again.

# Chapter 127:
## Like a Child, or Like a Demon

Matthias moved at an unhurried pace. The moment he had first caught sight of Layla, his heart had started pounding furiously. With each step he took, however, it had calmed down, eventually slowing below its original rate.

He recognized her immediately. There was no way that the woman standing in front of him was anyone else. He was certain he was looking at his Layla.

Just as he was about to call out her name, she turned around and started fleeing him. Yes, once again she was fleeing him.

He found her vain attempt at escape cute, so he decided to play along. He was going to need some time anyway, if he didn't want to simply snap her slender neck at once.

Because she was unable to move very fast, chasing after her felt like a leisurely stroll. He felt like he was walking on air, much like he had felt during the spring when his head had been clouded with sleeping pills.

She paused momentarily when she reached the end of the alleyway she had fled down. Beyond the trembling woman, he could see a long road, a sandy beach, and the emerald-colored ocean. It was even more beautiful than he had imagined.

* * *

Feeling flustered, Layla stepped out onto the beach. Her feet sank into the sand as she walked, making it difficult to retain her balance, but she knew she couldn't stop. Nor could she look over her shoulder.

The officer continued to chase after her at an unhurried pace. She had thought that once she emerged from the alleyway onto the beach there might be someone who could help her, but now she realized that was a foolish thought. The beach was as empty as the

street, and was silent other than the lazy waves lapping at the shore, and the occasional cry of a seagull.

What could the man want with her? She had no idea. If she had broken the occupying force's rules, she would have expected him to simply give her a warning or arrest her. Instead, he just kept chasing after her, not saying a word. That was the most confusing and frightening thing of all.

If he wanted to, he could have easily caught her by now. He was clearly a hardy, strong soldier, and she wasn't even capable of running. So why hadn't he caught her yet? She felt like she was about to burst into tears. Why wasn't he catching up to her?

Her desire to look back at him was overpowered by an even stronger desire to avoid seeing his face. She was frightened by the prospect that her absurd hunch about his identity might prove to be correct, but she was equally frightened by that it might turn out to be a delusion.

She had felt this way many times since coming to Sienne. Whenever she saw a tall man with black hair, her heart would sink as she momentarily believed it was the duke. Trembling, she would flee. However, it had always turned out to be her imagination, every single time. This time was likely no different. All she had to do was look over her shoulder and check. For all she knew, there was no one chasing after her at all.

Eventually she reached the wet sand at the edge of the shore. There was nowhere left for her to escape, short of walking into the ocean.

She came to a stop and looked down at the sea foam touching her shoes. Oddly, the realization that she had nowhere left to escape made her feel more calm. She knew well how to wake up from a dream. All she had to do was open her eyes.

Praying internally, she raised her eyes to the distant sky and slowly turned around. The man was standing on the beach, keeping his distance as he gazed at her. The autumn sunlight shone brightly on his face, making his identity impossible to miss.

It was Matthias von Herhardt, her brutal but handsome nightmare.

* * *

For a long while, the gentle waves continued to flow in and out as the two of them stood motionless, staring at each other.

A soft, cool breeze started to blow, making the hem of his trench coat flutter before passing onto her as she stood with her back to the ocean.

He took in the sight with relish. Her blonde hair, fluttering like a beautiful pair of wings, her trembling, tear-filled green eyes, and...

After slowly crawling over the rest of her body, his eyes came to a sudden halt. Her flimsy dress had been blown against her body by the breeze, making her shape distinctly visible. While most of her body was skinnier than before, her belly looked noticeably larger.

Cocking his head slightly, he narrowed his eyes, keeping them fixed on the same spot. As if to confirm that he wasn't imagining things, the breeze started blowing even harder. Her belly, which had always been completely flat before, was now unmistakably plump.

As the smile faded from his lips, the defenseless Layla put her slender, trembling arms over her belly. She reflexively started to back away, but there was still nowhere for her to go.

Once he was certain of what he was seeing, he started to laugh. He could feel his mind gradually growing clear, as if he had just awoken from a long sleep. Suddenly, everything that had brought him to this moment—the war breaking out, his enlistment, and the almost deranged passion with which he had fought—felt like a faintly remembered dream. None of it seemed real. He felt like he had been floating along in a river, carried by the current.

For the first time since the day he had sunk in the Schulter River, he felt like he had finally come out of the water, into the place where the glittering sunlight shone against the rustling forest leaves, and the birds sang their beautiful songs.

*Layla...*

As he whispered that name, his smile grew more relaxed.

*Layla... My little bird, Layla...*

With his hands behind his back, he stood up straighter. That elegant, gentlemanly posture stood in stark contrast to the delighted smile on his face. As she beheld this, Layla's eyes started to tremble.

Her mouth went dry, and her breathing quickened. She could feel the baby inside her start to kick, as if it was frightened as well. All she could do, however, was desperately keep trying to hide her belly with her arms.

There was no way she was seeing things or having a nightmare—Matthias was standing in front of her. He had somehow come to this place that she thought he would never find.

"Hello, Layla," he whispered, smiling. His smile was like that of a child, or a demon.

* * *

"Shouldn't you try to stop him? You said it was a pregnant woman, right?"

The soldier's voice quivered as he whispered his question to the aide. The aide, who had been nervously biting his lip, frowned and replied, "Of course I want to stop him. But how am I supposed to do that? Break into the major's room and rescue her?"

"Maybe not that, but you've got to do something. What have you gotten yourself into?"

"I don't know! I really don't know, damn it!"

The aide grew more and more distraught as the conversation continued.

Major Herhardt had asked him to find out a woman's address, and he had readily complied. He had figured that she was simply an acquaintance or distant relative of the major. Little had he suspected what was really going on!

Rumors that the major had abducted a woman spread quickly throughout the unit. At first, everyone assumed it was a joke. While

he had gained several brutal nicknames during the war, and was even jokingly rumored to be descended from a vampire, Major Herhardt's reputation was clean when it came to women. In fact, many of the other soldiers had wondered if he lacked desire for women altogether.

Thus it was incomprehensible that he would openly abduct a woman from the occupied area and drag her back to his room. However, it soon became abundantly clear that this ridiculous scenario was real.

Carrying a woman in his arms, Major Herhardt arrived back at the hotel on the square that had been designated as the officers' quarters. He was moving with confidence, as if he didn't care at all about all the people watching him. Wrapped in the major's coat, the woman was soaked from head to foot, as if she had been underwater.

She was so small, she had looked like a child at first. Viewed up close, however, she had luckily turned out to be an adult. However, it was still quite disturbing that the major was lusting after a woman in what looked like an advanced state of pregnancy. Especially considering that she struggled and resisted the whole way to his room.

Unable to ignore her frightened cries for help, the aide had mustered all his courage and stepped in front of the major, blocking his way. Once there, however, he had felt too intimated to say anything. All that the major had said to him was *“Move,”* but that single word was enough send a chill down the aide's spine. After hesitating for a moment, he had stepped aside, and Major Herhardt had continued on to his room, the door of which he had then shut forcefully and locked.

That was all that the aide had witnessed directly. It wasn't hard to guess what had happened after that, but he didn't feel like entertaining such unpleasant thoughts.

“Should we report him to a superior officer?”

“You really think they'd do anything about it? He's a Herhardt.”

“That's true...”

Their conversation started to fizzle out without a conclusion.

“He's never shown any interest in other women. Why is he suddenly obsessed with this one?” the aide asked, overcome with guilt.

Meanwhile, a medic entered the mess hall. It was Kyle Ettman. He had just returned from a field hospital, and he had not yet heard the news that had turned the entire unit upside down. Sitting down at the table, he noticed the agitated look on the aide's face, and calmly asked, “Hey, what's the matter?”

“Come to think of it, you know the major, don't you? Has he always been like that?”

“Like what?”

“The noble Duke Herhardt just abducted a pregnant woman and dragged her to his room. It's been causing quite a stir around here.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Kyle asked. He looked very upset, just as the other soldiers had looked when the aide had first told them about what happened.

“Judging by your surprise, I guess he's not usually like this?” the aide replied. “What's gotten into him, then? Did he lose his mind on the battlefield? If I had known what he was planning, I would've lied and said I couldn't find her. I feel like it's my fault.”

“What did you do?” Kyle asked.

“As soon as we got here, he gave me the name of some woman and asked me to find out her address. Who knew he was planning to do something like that? I mean, who is she? Why is he acting like that over her?”

As Kyle listened to the disturbing things the aide was telling him, a cold look fell over his eyes. “That woman, the woman the major had you find... Do you remember her name?”

“Of course I do. I just found her earlier today. Her name is Lay-”

“Layla,” Kyle quietly said, cutting him off.

Everyone's eyes widened.

“Layla Llewellyn,” Kyle said more loudly. His voice was starting

to shake, as were his fists.

“Huh? How did you know that?”

Kyle almost stopped breathing when he saw the look of surprise on the aide's face. *So that's why the duke was obsessed with Sienne. Because Layla was here. I can't believe it. But it must be true.*

“Hey! Kyle! Say something!”

“That bastard...” Kyle muttered hatefully. Then, all of a sudden, he rose from his seat and started running upstairs before anyone had time to react.

# Chapter 128:
## A Heavenly Yet Hellish Time

After a flurry of activity, silence descended on the hotel room. Knowing that there was nothing she could do, Layla hid herself in this silence, while Matthias continued to gaze at her with an amused look on his face.

“Wh-why… why are you here?” she asked in a shaky voice.

She wasn't dreaming. She had no doubt about this fact anymore. Even the worst nightmare would pale in comparison to what she was now experiencing. There was only one person in the whole world capable of making her waking life more nightmarish than a nightmare, and that was Matthias von Herhardt. Thus, she was certain that this was reality. He had come and found her.

“Why am I here?” he asked, still smiling at her. “I came here to kill you.”

The cheerful-looking expression on his face as he whispered this gave her goosebumps.

She stared back at him, too frightened to move a muscle.

“You know better than anyone that I don't accept deals that I get nothing out of, Layla. If you're going back on our deal, you leave me no other option.”

Watching with amusement as she trembled speechlessly, the duke let out a chuckle. His gleaming blue eyes lent a chilling quality to his laughter.

“Of course, I hadn't anticipated this wonderful surprise,” he added, slowly lowering his narrowed eyes to her round belly. “I must admit, it does give me some pause.” He stood up and walked in front of her.

“Don't touch me! I'm not your mistress anymore!” she shouted, coldly pushing his hand away from her cheek before wrapping her arms around her belly to hide it.

He shifted his gaze from her arms, which looked very fragile and

slender, to her green eyes, which were filling with tears. Those eyes looked just like they had looked the last time he had seen her, before she had abandoned him and run away.

Gently pouting, he put his hand against her cheek again and said, “Layla, if you shout like that, won't it startle our baby?”

Shuddering, she pushed his hand away again and replied, “It's n-not your baby!”

“Really?” he scoffed.

“I have... a husband here! I got married... Here in Lovita.”

He quietly watched as she struggled to come up with something to say. She looked back at him with a determined look in her eyes. *This is getting to be very interesting,* he thought. *Well, it was already quite interesting back at the beach.*

Nodding, he switched on the lamp on the small table next to the sofa. The room, which had been dark because the curtains were drawn, was suffused with a dim light. He walked back in front of her, and she reflexively leaned further back into the seat and hunched her shoulders.

He slowly closed and opened his eyes as he gazed at her face, which was illuminated by warm light of the lamp. Her moist eyes were red and trembling. She couldn't have deceived a child, and yet she was openly lying to him.

“Who is he?” he asked, cocking his head slightly. “Your husband, I mean.”

Her lips started to twitch as a look of intense deliberation came over her face. Behind the cracked lenses of her glasses, her eyes were trembling nervously as well.

“Think carefully before you answer,” he said, touching the hair that was covering her cheek. “If you offer up the name of some man at random, Layla…” Looking into her frightened eyes, he slowly brushed her hair from her cheek. “That man will die.”

She shivered at the softness of his touch as he made this coldhearted pronouncement.

“Because I will kill him.”

He gently clutched her chin and lifted it up. Forced to make eye contact with him again, she started biting her lip.

“It's not your baby!” she shouted, letting a torrent of emotions rise from deep inside her. “My baby doesn't have a father.”

“What?”

“It's my baby! Just mine! No one else is involved!”

He sneered at her, which made her even more angry.

“Layla, I think you're a bit too obsessed with the idea of being a saint,” he said, chuckling. “What happened, did you conceive through the Holy Spirit?”

“…”

“Is it God's baby, then?”

“…”

“I guess I'm your god, then. What an honor.”

He chuckled a little louder. Meanwhile, his eyes remained coldly fixed on her face.

He didn't need any further proof. The moment the wind had blown her dress against her body and he had seen the outline of her belly, he was certain that the baby was his. There wasn't the slightest doubt in his mind. The woman who had abandoned him was carrying his baby.

As he held her distraught face, he gradually put more strength into his grip. Then he started caressing her cheek, and whispered, “Layla...”

The tips of his fingers trembled slightly as he gently ran them across her lips, nose, and the edges of her eyes.

The unfamiliar sensation caused her to look up at him again. Just then, there was an incredibly loud banging sound at the door.

“Layla! Are you in there? Layla! Layla!”

It was a familiar voice.

“Kyle…?” she said. She turned away from Matthias and looked at the door. “Is that really you, Kyle? Are you here too? Did you get drafted? Kyle, how did-”

“Stop,” Matthias said, pulling her face back towards him.

*Kyle... Kyle... Kyle...*

It grated at his nerves to hear the woman who despised him plaintively calling that name. Once again, he felt utterly low and worthless.

He was someone whom the emperor himself looked at as an equal, and yet somehow this woman was effortlessly able to make him feel like a nobody. The fact that he had longed for this feeling of subjection made him feel even more despondent. It was a sweet enough feeling to make his teeth chatter with contempt. It had been like that from the start.

“Please, Layla.”

His voice cracked as he spoke, which made her feel even more disconcerted.

“If you say that name one more time, I might have to put a bullet in Kyle Ettman's head.” His whisper sounded like a pained groan. “So please, don't say it again.”

She could sense that it wasn't an empty threat. Her face went pale. The blank look in his eyes made her feel dazed. He wasn't the type to joke about things like this.

She closed her trembling lips, whereupon he patted her head appreciatively. It was a very gentle touch, and yet she felt like he could change his mind and strangle her at any moment.

He turned away from her and started walking towards the shaking door.

* * *

“Private Ettman! Stop!”

Several soldiers hurried towards Kyle and tried to stop him as he pounded on the door of Major Herhardt's room.

Previously, Kyle had been so well-behaved that the other soldiers had found him uptight. Now, however, he was acting wildly, as if the change in his superior officer's behavior had made him snap. He had run straight from the mess hall to Major Herhardt's door, and was now pounding on it ferociously.

“Layla! Layla!”

“You stupid bastard!” one of the soldiers shouted. “You're going to get yourself in so much trouble!”

“Let go of me! Layla!”

Kyle continued to ignore the soldiers’ warnings as he pounded on the door and shouted for Layla, until suddenly the door opened.

Matthias surveyed the chaotic scene in the hallway with his usual calmness.

“Do you have Layla in there?” Kyle asked.

“Don't tell me you knew she was here in Lovita from the start!”

“Get out of here, Private Ettman,” Matthias said, closing the door behind him.

He seemed to have no intention of discussing Layla, which provoked Kyle's anger even more.

“So you knew Layla's whereabouts this whole time, and yet you pretended not to know a thing! And now you're treating her like an object! How cruel can a person be? How dare you treat her like-”

Kyle's shouting stopped abruptly, along with the gasps and cries of the soldiers surrounding him. Among all the faces in the hallway, only one remained calm. It belonged to Matthias, who was holding a pistol to Kyle's head.

With his finger loosely touching the trigger, he furrowed his brow disapprovingly and calmly said, “Be quiet, Private Ettman. You're going to startle the baby.”

*The baby?* Kyle's face twisted in confusion.

Matthias, showing the first sign of human emotion since he had stepped into the hallway, added, “My baby.”

As Kyle saw the smile on Matthias's face, he suddenly remembered that the other soldiers had been whispering to each other about Major Herhardt abducting a pregnant woman.

*If the woman he abducted was Layla, then that means...*

Over the previous few months, Matthias had only ever looked at Kyle with indifference. Now, however, he watched with pleasure as the light slowly faded from Kyle's eyes. It was a pleasure mixed

with malice and jealousy, along with equal measures of both triumph and shame. He looked more human than he had since the war began.

As an icy silence descended between the two men, some military police ran up to the group, having heard the commotion.

Matthias lowered his pistol from Kyle's forehead and took a step back. The military police officers glanced at Matthias, and then resolved the situation by taking Kyle into custody, believing him to be guilty of insubordination against a superior officer.

Matthias stood in the same spot until Kyle had been dragged out of sight. While the other witnesses were highly alarmed, Matthias alone remained utterly calm. He soon left them in the hallway and stepped back into his room.

Layla, who had been standing just behind the door, flinched and took several steps back. Her lips, which had been about to shout Kyle's name, shut again, making no sound.

Smiling contently, Matthias wrapped his arms around her as she staggered. Embracing her like this gave him the feeling that the last piece of his puzzle was being put into place. He liked it.

She didn't try to resist as he sat her down on the bed and knelt at her feet. He then calmly removed her soggy shoes and socks, which had gotten soaked when she had vainly tried to run into the sea to escape him.

As much as she feared water, she feared him even more. But he had managed to catch her nonetheless. This had caused a combination of pain, joy, and disillusionment to rise inside of him. Reflecting on it now, he felt the same mix of feelings once again.

She sat obediently until he tried to touch her belly, at which point she obstinately pulled away from him. Looking up at her tear-filled eyes, he smiled. Rather than try to feel for the baby again, he firmly clutched Layla's cold ankles.

For a long while, he quietly gazed at the woman for whom he had felt so much passion that he had wanted to kill her. No matter what state she was in, his queen looked dazzlingly beautiful.

It was a heavenly yet hellish time.

# Chapter 129:
## Chain

“Don't be needlessly stubborn,” Matthias said, looking down at the untouched meal on the table. His long eyelashes cast deep shadows on his face. “You're being selfish, Layla. Won't you think of the baby?” He stood up and walked in front of Layla.

Once she realized that there was no point in struggling or asking to be set free, she had become completely passive, just sitting there like a doll. While he was there, she would neither eat nor speak. Instead, all she did was sit and glare at him. When that grew tiresome, she would fall asleep in place.

After several hours passed, she finally broke the silence, hoarsely saying, “Don't you dare say anything about my baby. You don't have the right.”

“Whatever do you mean?” he asked, smiling indifferently. With a firm but gentle motion, he placed a fork in her hand. “Layla, I never neglect my responsibilities. You must be aware of that.”

“No. My baby and I have nothing to do with you. So you have no responsibility towards either of us.”

“If you don't like calling it my responsibility, then think of it as God's will.” He pulled her hand with the fork in it above her plate. “It's the will of the same God who made the baby inside you.”

Under the power of his strength, the tines of her fork smoothly pierced a bite-sized piece of meat. While she remained stubbornly motionless, he returned to his seat and continued eating.

She glared angrily at him for a moment, then flung the fork with the meat on it to the floor and stood up. Frowning at the noise, he slowly raised his eyes to look at her.

“If you're going to kill me, then get it over with and kill me already. Stop beating around the bush!” she shouted.

“If only I could,” he replied, sighing. He stood up, picked the fork up off the floor, and set it down on the table. “If it were just you, I

would've already granted your wish, Layla. Unfortunately, however, you're with child, so I won't be able to do anything for a while."

After sighing again, he left the room. When he returned a short while later with a new fork, she was standing in front of the window, shaking like a cornered mouse, with a steak knife in her hand.

"You seemed to have gained energy while I was gone. Are you starting to like it in here?" he asked.

"Stop it," she snapped back. "Get away from me. Let me go right now."

"But Layla, you should've used your head just a little more."

After gently setting the fork down on the table, he walked up to her. She raised the knife, as if she was really going to stab him.

"My pistol is right over there, after all," he said, looking with mock pity at the bedside table, where he had left his holster with his pistol in it. "And yet you picked that weapon instead? If only you'd been as resourceful as you are passionate."

"Do you think that if you treat me like this, I'll become your mistress again? That will never happen. Never! I'd sooner die than go back to that life."

"You really think that's all I want?" he asked.

His response made her freeze.

"Do you still view me as a fool who can fall for his mistress's tricks?"

Her face went blank as she looked at him. The man standing in front of her didn't seem like the Matthias von Herhardt she knew. That was one thing of which she was certain, no matter how confusing everything else was.

"You killed that fool, Layla." The smile vanished from his face and was replaced by utter coldness.

"If that's not it, then what is it?" she asked. "What do you want from me?"

Even though she knew there was nowhere for her to escape, she backed up, pressing her back against the window frame. As she did

so, the knife dropped from her loose, trembling hand, falling onto the carpet.

“I'll let you know what I want once it's settled,” he replied, snickering. “Until then, eat.” Acting like a gentleman escorting a lady, he then led her to the table and sat her down. “You need to feed my baby, after all.”

As he looked down at her round belly, she flinched uncomfortably, as if there were a bug crawling on her.

“I told you, it's not your baby.”

“I fully understand and respect your wish for me to kill you, but I won't be able to grant it until the baby has made it safely out of you.” After looking down at the knife on the floor and shaking his head, he lifted his own knife and cut up the steak on her plate. “Looking at you right now, I'm unsure whether even that will be possible. So eat up.”

“I'm sorry, but my stomach is incapable of taking in food when someone like you is nearby,” she replied, remaining obstinate even as she felt like crying.

He chuckled at her behavior. She reminded him of an ill-behaved puppy. He didn't mind it. He was glad that she didn't realize how much he enjoyed this side of her personality. If she were aware of the way it made him feel, she would have stopped the behavior at once.

“Fine, keep up the act, then,” he said.

“You're a great actress, Layla.” He took a sip of water and cocked his head as he looked at her. “Just remarkable. Your eyes, your smile, even the way you behave like a cat in heat. It's truly a flawless performance.”

“Stop it!”

“It's a compliment, Layla. Anyway, your virtuosic acting is the reason that little surprise is growing inside of you. In other words, your acting skills saved your life.”

“Don't talk about my baby like that!”

“Oh, was I wrong about that? Did the baby come from sincere

love? If you say so, I'll gladly accept the correction."

Rubbing the long stem of his water glass, he observed her expression. Blushing severely, she was back glaring at him. He chuckled at her reaction. "So try again. If you put on such a great acting display in order to escape from me, shouldn't you put on an even better display in order to save your life?"

"I won't fall for your tricks anymore," she replied.

"This isn't a trick, Layla. It's a generous offer."

"Until you let me go, I'm not going to drink one drop of water. That fact will never change, no matter what."

Occasionally she had wondered about him, thinking that perhaps he had grown. Now she felt ashamed to have even considered the possibility. He was the same as he had always been. He was tormenting her once again, just as cruelly and boldly, without showing the slightest sign of guilt or remorse.

"I think it will have to change," he remarked, narrowing his eyes. "You see, Kyle Ettman is currently imprisoned, as punishment for his outburst. He seemed to have lost his reason over you."

"H-he's in jail? Kyle is? How could you?!"

"You can't blame me for that, Layla. This is the military. Rules are rules. There's nothing I can do about it."

"That's a lie! It's all because of you!"

"In any case, Kyle is in prison, and he's probably quite hungry by now. I'm not the reason he was imprisoned, but I am the reason he's not being fed. It was my special request." Sitting back in his chair, he crossed his legs and smiled. "Until I see you eat, Kyle won't eat either. However much food I do see you eat, Kyle will get that much food as well. If you keep starving yourself like this, though, what can I do? Private Ettman will starve as well."

"How can a person be so cruel? Now that Uncle Bill is gone, you've captured Kyle so that you can keep threatening me in the same way as before!" Her hands trembled as she clutched the edge of the table, not with fear, but with anger.

*Bill Remmer...?* Matthias's eyes twitched briefly when he heard

her mention Bill's name, but he quickly regained his composure.

Just then, she bolted up out of her chair. It wasn't hard to guess what she was intending to do. She took a deep breath, and then yanked the tablecloth off the table, causing all the food and dishes to fall to the floor. While the sound of broken dishes and clattering utensils echoed through the room, the two of them stared silently at each other.

“Poor Kyle,” he finally said, sighing. He seemed amazingly relaxed amid all this commotion. “I guess he'll be going another day without food.” After clicking his tongue in mock dismay, he took the napkin from his knee and wiped the sauce off the toes of his boots, then stood up.

The icy silence of the room was then filled with the sound of him walking to the door and unfastening the chains on it. That was soon followed by the sound of the door opening and closing again, and then the chains on the outside of the door being fastened and locked.

Layla, who had been standing with her fists tightly clenched, then collapsed back into her chair.

The warm afternoon sunlight shone on her and the mess that she had been left alone in. Bothered by the way the sunlight was glittering in the fragments of the dishes on the floor, she closed her eyes.

* * *

The aide looked uneasily at the locked door.

Since abducting the woman and putting her in his room, whenever the duke left the room he would thoroughly lock it, using a chain and padlock. It seemed that the duke had truly become unhinged since entering Sienne.

The aide let out a deep sigh, then carefully unlocked the padlock. He didn't look forward to the sight that he knew was going to greet him upon entering the room, but he couldn't go against his superior's orders.

After clearing his throat, he gently knocked on the door and said, “I'm coming in for a moment, Miss.” He then opened the door and stepped into the room.

The woman, who was sitting in front of the window that looked out onto the square, flinched and turned towards the door. The mess in the middle of the room had been cleaned up, but her face looked even paler than before.

“What's that…?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at the covered tray the aide had placed on the table.

“You should eat this,” he said. “You have to eat to live, after all. And you should think of the baby. This has absolutely nothing to do with Major Herhardt.”

The aide was doing his best to lie convincingly. If he were simply to let the woman go, everything would be resolved, but he knew he couldn't do that. He didn't understand why the major had gone to such trouble to drag her here and lock her up in the first place, but he knew it was his duty to carry out his orders.

“I've brought you this food without the major's knowledge. If he were to find out about this, I'd be in a lot of trouble. He should be returning in about thirty minutes. You'd better finish it before then,” he said, reciting the lines the major had given him verbatim.

The woman stared blankly at him for a moment, then looked at the tray again. It seemed that she didn't intend to beg him to let her go today. He was glad about this, as it had been very awkward having to turn her down previously.

*Perhaps she had given up?* It would make things much easier for him if she had, and yet it saddened him to think about it.

After nervously fidgeting for a while, she said, “So, could you tell me... Is Kyle really in jail?”

“Kyle? You mean Kyle Ettman, the medic?”

“Yes, that's who I mean. Is he?”

“Ah... yes, yes he is. He's serving a sentence for insubordination.” When he saw the woman's eyes fill with tears, he felt uncomfortable and looked away, before adding, “It w-won't be a long sentence.”

The woman nodded appreciatively at this last comment, though her face was still marked with deep sadness. “Could you bring this food to Kyle instead, then?”

His eyes widened at this unexpected request. “Pardon?”

It was hard to imagine something more foolhardy than to bring the food sent by the major not to its designated recipient, but to the man who was in jail for defying the major. If he were to do that, he was sure he would be immediately locked up right next to Kyle Ettman himself.

“I'm afraid I won't be able to do that, Miss.”

“Oh... okay,” she replied resignedly. “I'm sorry for asking. And thank you for bringing this.”

The courtesy and submissiveness with which she was treating him made him feel even more guilty, so he hurried out the room. As he was closing the door, he was happy to see that the woman was lifting the cover from the tray. It was a sandwich and a glass of soda water. He had been surprised that an aristocratic officer like the major even knew of such cuisine, but he had faithfully followed the order. Hoping that the woman would eat it, he closed and locked the door again.

# Chapter 130:
## I Guess I've Really Lost It

When Matthias arrived back at the room, Layla was sitting by the window, looking exhausted. The sun had set, but she had not turned on the light, so the room was dark.

After locking the door, he sauntered towards her and switched on the lamp. Just as he was about to draw the curtains, he was surprised to hear her speak first.

“I ate,” she said. “The brown-haired soldier brought me a sandwich and I ate it.”

“So?”

“So… you should feed Kyle too,” she replied with a determined look on her face.

He stared back at her for a moment before snickering as he leaned against the window frame. He had expected her to make this request, but it still bothered him to hear it come out of her mouth.

“I'm not lying,” she continued. “I really did eat. If you don't believe me, you can check for y-”

“I believe you,” he coldly said, cutting her off. “But that's not a reason for me to let Kyle eat.”

“But you promised!”

“Did you forget, Layla? I told you very clearly that I would give Kyle as much food as I saw you eat with my own eyes.”

He was growing even calmer as his words became colder. Her face went pale as she stared at him in disbelief. “What do you expect to gain from being so cruel? What happened to the lofty pride of the noble Duke Herhardt?” She staggered up from her chair and walked in front of him. “You abandoned your new bride and joined the war just so that you could chase after your mistress who fled you out of hate. What a pathetic man you've become. I guess you've thrown your pride away, huh?”

She was still frightened of him, but right now her anger was

overpowering her fear.

“I don't know. Have I?” he casually replied, taking off his cap and setting it down on the table with a smile. Far from seeming angry at her, he seemed carefree and amused.

*He's unhinged,* she thought, suddenly remembering just how strange and unpredictable he was. She felt so much hatred for him, her teeth almost started to chatter.

“What are you thinking?” she asked. “What are you planning to do? Are you just going to keep tormenting me? Is that how you're planning to get revenge on me for deceiving you and running away? Do you think you have the right to do that?”

“As the father of the baby you're carrying, surely I have at least that right, don't you think?”

“How dare you say that?! I can't stand to hear you mention my baby at all!” She wrapped her arms around her belly and stepped away from him. “You have nothing to do with me or my baby. So leave! Go back to the duchess and live your life with her!”

She gritted her teeth to stop herself from breaking into tears.

*Don't expect anything,* she had been telling herself over and over again, ever since her improbable reunion with him. Now she feared that her expectancy was starting to grow again. If her heart were to break once more, she didn't think that she could stand it. However, he had always treated her horribly.

“Think logically about this, Layla. How do you expect to survive as a single mother in the middle of a war?”

He was now standing right in front of her. The smile was gone from his face.

“My baby and I will do just fine on our own,” she replied. “We can do anything, as long as you're not around. I find you much more detestable than the war!”

“Layla Llewellyn.”

“Don't touch me! Don't lay a finger on my body! You're dirty!” Shuddering, she batted his hand away.

“Dirty...?” he asked, chuckling.

Stepping back away from him until she was in the corner of the room, she replied, “Yes, dirty!” Despite her fear, she was shouting vehemently. “I hate you so much. You're dirty. You always were, and you always will be. There, is that a good enough response?”

* * *

A voice rang out in the hotel basement storage area, which had been turned into a makeshift jail cell. “Kyle! Hey, Kyle!”

Kyle had been sitting on the floor, leaning against the cold, stone wall, staring at his feet. He looked up indifferently at the sound of his name. Through the bars of the cell, he saw the familiar face of his friend, the army surgeon, and said, “Lieutenant! What are you doing here…?”

“What do you think I'm doing here? I was worried about you. As soon as I heard what happened, I knew I had to come check up on you.” Sighing, the surgeon walked up to the bars and crouched down. Surveying the cell's interior, he noticed at tray of dinner sitting untouched in the corner. Just as he had heard, it appeared that Kyle was refusing to eat.

“You should eat the meals they bring you, Kyle. Being stubborn like this won't get you anything. It'll just make you weak.”

“What happened to the woman the duke... I mean, Major Herhardt brought in? Has she been let go?” Kyle asked. None of the other soldiers would answer this question for him, and the concern in his voice was palpable.

“Well...” the soldier replied, looking uncomfortable. After letting out a long sigh, he continued. “She's still with the major. But I don't think he's doing anything bad to her. I think he's just holding her prisoner.”

“That bastard...”

“Kyle, get a hold of yourself. We're at war right now. No matter what personal feelings you might have about the major, he's your superior officer.” The surgeon was surprised to see Kyle overcome by anger, when normally he was so well-behaved. “Anyway, Kyle,

you've got to eat. How about you eat your food, regain your reason, and then apologize to the major? That's the only way you're getting out of here anytime soon."

"No. I'm never apologizing to that guy."

"Why are you acting like this, Kyle? It's not like you. Who is that woman, anyway? And what's her connection to the major?"

Rumors had been spreading even more quickly now that both Major Herhardt and Kyle Ettman were behaving erratically. The perfect gentleman Duke Herhardt, the son of his family's doctor, and the beautiful woman that had come between them—it was a scandal that no one could resist talking about. The fact that none of the concerned parties were offering any details only made the gossipers more eager to speculate.

Kyle gulped and looked away, saying nothing. Major Herhardt hadn't answered any of the surgeon's questions, and it seemed that it would be no different with Kyle.

"You should really eat. All right, Kyle?"

Eventually, the surgeon stood up resignedly. The lights from the storage area hallway and the shadows of the cell's bars flickered over the cold food on the tray.

When the soldier took one last look over his shoulder before leaving, Kyle was still sitting in the exact same spot.

* * *

Matthias gazed at Layla as she stood in place, staring blankly. As he watched her, his emotionless face gave way to a smile, which then faded. After this happened a few times, he walked towards her.

Firmly clutching the hem of her skirt, she stared straight at him as he approached. Suddenly, thoughts of Claudine had entered her mind. The more she tried to avoid thinking about her, the more clearly her memories presented themselves to her. She winced as she thought of the shame and humiliation the duke's fiancée had made her feel after she had found out about everything. It had made her feel miserable, especially since she hadn't been able to

refute any of her accusations. She had thought that she had forgotten about all of that, but it seemed that she hadn't.

All throughout the late spring and summer, whenever she was sitting on the cold floor of the bathroom or huddled in a corner of the museum storage area, suffering from horrible morning sickness, she would think, *Their wedding is fast approaching,* and later, *They must be married by now.* Such thoughts came to her mind each time she had to hide the fact that she was pregnant.

As the fetus had grown inside of her, so had her sadness. Even after war suddenly broke out and turned the world upside down, her fear of the war still didn't completely eliminate the sadness. This was especially true when she had a sudden craving for some specific food, or when she saw a sweet newlywed couple with a baby. This would always make her think of the duke and duchess, whom she assumed had not only had a lavish wedding, but were likely expecting a baby of their own.

At such times, she would whisper to her belly, *It's all right, Baby, it's all right. Mommy's going to love you double. So don't worry.* This was how she had managed to endure things so far, and she wanted things to stay that way. There was no way she was going to allow herself to be taken in by the duke again and let the baby inside her live through the same pain and sorrow she had gone through.

Matthias stopped one step away from her. His face was cold and expressionless. She couldn't help but flinch, but she didn't avert her eyes.

"Layla, how are you going to put up with the child of the dirty man that's standing before you?"

"My baby has nothing to do with you!" she cried just as desperately as ever, even as she was growing extremely tired of his word games.

"I guess you really love that baby, huh?" he asked with amusement.

Instead of saying anything in response, she answered him by putting her arms over her belly to cover it.

“A woman who loves the baby of the man she hates…” After looking back and forth between her face and her belly a few times, he burst into dry laughter. His eyes remained frighteningly serious even as he laughed. “How funny.”

“You've really lost it, haven't you?” she asked.

“Yep,” he replied, putting his hands to her face.

She tried to turn her head away from him, but his strength was too much for her.

“I couldn't have made it here in my right mind,” he continued.

She was taken aback by his calmness.

“Something I really like about you, Layla, is the way you always put your weaknesses on display for me.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“No matter how much you hate me, no matter how dirty or detestable you find me, in the end, you're always still mine.”

“No. That's not true.”

“Yes it is. Because I will take the baby.”

Because he was speaking in such a gentle voice, she wasn't sure she had heard him right at first. Now he started laughing as if he were suddenly overcome with joy.

“Once the baby is born, I'll let you go. Don't worry, I won't kill you. You can run away wherever you want. You'll just have to leave the baby behind.”

As the haze lifted from her mind and she grasped what he was saying, her resistance intensified. She tried pushing him, hitting him, and scratching him, but he wouldn't let her go.

“Let go of me! Now! How dare you threaten to take my baby?! I'll never forgive you! Never!”

“Calm down, Layla. You're going to disturb our beloved baby.”

He lowered his hands from her cheeks and grasped her flailing arms. She kept trying to struggle, even after it became impossible to move her arms anymore.

Without exerting much strength, he was able to put his arms around her and lift her up. She was quite small even though she

was pregnant, and she fit snugly in his arms as always.

He set the exhausted woman down on the bed and smiled warmly. It was the first sincere smile that had appeared on his face since she had disappeared in the spring. Even if she would never forgive him, he had found a way to hold on to her. The relief that this brought him allowed him to finally breathe freely.

Her lips twitched for a moment, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she just shed thick tears. He removed her cracked glasses from her face and set them down on the bedside table, then stooped over and kissed the moist edges of her eyes. Like an animal licking its wounds, he lapped up her tears. *I guess I've really lost it,* he thought as he savored the briny taste. *Well, that's fine with me.*

# Chapter 131:
## The Path to Salvation

Matthias awoke very early, before the sun had risen. With his eyes still adjusted to the dark, he looked around the room. The first thing he noticed was the empty spot next to him in the bed. It was odd—Layla had definitely cried herself to sleep right there, but now there was nothing but darkness in her place.

As soon as he realized this, he reflexively sat up. First he looked at the door, and saw that it was still securely locked. This brought him some relief. The door was the only way out of the room. Thus, she was still in the room, unless she had jumped out of the window...

At this unpleasant thought, he bolted out of bed and ran towards the windows. Both windows were shut and locked, but his uneasiness lingered. Just as his heart was starting to pound rapidly, he found Layla in an unexpected spot.

He sighed at the sight before him. She was curled up on the sofa, fast asleep. When he saw the thin blanket she was using for warmth, he couldn't help but chuckle. He could almost hear her saying, *"Don't touch me. You're dirty."*

She found his presence loathsome enough that she couldn't stand to lie next to him, and yet back in the spring she had smiled so beautifully at him. She had given herself to his embrace and whispered sweet nothings in his ear. And yet, despite all those apparent signs of love, she had hated him all along.

As he quietly reflected on this thought, his face showed no expression. He had already been aware of this, he just hadn't fully accepted it till now.

Where was the line between sincerity and deceit with her?

Ever since she had first disappeared, he had been mulling over this question, and now he finally knew the answer. It had all been deceit with her. He had loved her, but she hadn't loved him back at

all. Nonetheless, his memories of the show of love she had put on were still vivid, which only made him feel more miserable.

He gently closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and carefully lifted her from the sofa and moved her over to the bed. She fidgeted a bit, but luckily did not wake up. Even in her pregnant state, she still felt remarkably light in his arms.

He placed her down on the bed very gently, then slowly pulled the covers over her body. Instead of lying down next to her, he pulled up a chair next to the bed and sat down in it.

Her face looked calm and innocent as she slept. It occurred to him that this was the way her face looked when she was interacting with anyone other than him. To everyone but him, she was a bright, strong, kind young lady. He was the only person in the world who was more accustomed to seeing her cry than smile. And yet even so, she was going to have his child. He felt silly for fixating on that fact, but he couldn't help it.

He didn't understand how she could hate him so much, and yet love his baby. Regardless the reason, though, it was his only remaining hope. He knew that because of her love for the baby, she wouldn't die or run away. Thus, if he could keep the baby near himself, she would become his again.

The baby would thus function as the perfect set of shackles, the perfect birdcage. That was all the baby was to him. He felt no particular emotions towards it. Other than its usefulness to him as a way to hold on to Layla, it was meaningless to him.

As he thought about it, he realized that there was one emotion he felt about the baby: regret. He bitterly regretted not impregnating Layla sooner. If he had, she never would have been able to run away in the first place.

As the anxiousness left his face, he started smiling like a child holding piece of candy. From the moment he joined the war, to the moment he finally entered Sienne, he had been wishing for Layla's safety. She had to remain safe from harm until he got to her, so that he could kill her himself. He didn't want to kill her out of hatred or

resentment. Rather, it was out of love. Love had always been the reason he wanted to kill her.

He knew that her love for him had been a lie, and there was no way to forget that. Nonetheless, his love for her was as strong as ever. It felt like an unstoppable force inside him that threatened to devour the rest of his life. The only way to put an end to this overwhelming feeling, he thought, was to kill her with his own hands. Thus, until he could do so, she had to survive. It was imperative that she not die by any other cause.

With each passing day, his love for her had only grown stronger. And with that, his desire to kill her had grown in intensity as well. This desperate pattern had continued to this day. And yet, the moment he had laid eyes on her, standing in front of the beautiful sea, he had realized that he couldn't kill her. He wanted to kill her. He had to kill her. And yet, he couldn't kill her.

As he was reeling in the mixture of despair and joy that this realization had brought him, he had noticed her pregnant belly, and had known at once that it was his salvation.

Without any way to get her back, his only option had been to kill her. Now, however, this miraculous baby opened up a new path for him. It meant that he wouldn't have to kill her after all. If he could make the baby his, Layla would be his once again as well.

He slowly extended his arm and put his hand to her face as she continued to sleep. Moved by the warmth of his hand, she gently rubbed her cheek. Just like she had done during those moments of feigned excitement and love, those deceitful acts that had broken his heart.

Trying to suppress the urge to grab her face and pull her towards him, he continued gently caressing her cheek.

He knew she was going to keep hating him forever, but he didn't mind. He didn't mind that she would never forgive him, either. As long as he was going to possess her again, he didn't mind about anything else. Anything was fine. No matter how painful the choice might be, it couldn't be any more devastating than the time he had

spent alone without her.

As the dawn slowly brightened, he sat for a long time, gazing at her. Soon he started to feel a faint sense of hope again. Perhaps Layla could become his duchess. The baby would then naturally become his successor, and would gain all the power and honor of the Herhardt family. And that wasn't all. There were countless other things he could offer Layla and the child. Thus, perhaps one day she would have a change of heart, and her feelings towards him would change. Even if this wouldn't happen for a long, long time, he was prepared to wait it out.

Once the sun had fully risen and morning light was streaming in through the windows, he slowly stooped down and kissed her cheek.

“I love you,” he whispered to the woman who hated him. *I'm so happy that I don't have to kill you. I'm so happy that you'll be mine again, Layla.*

* * *

They ate breakfast in silence. Not a word passed between the two of them. The only sound was the clattering of utensils and dishes. Layla chewed and swallowed her food with a cold expression on her face, while Matthias watched her with amusement.

“I can't believe the stubborn Layla Llewellyn has changed her mind in order to save her friend from starving. What a touching expression of true friendship.”

He gazed at her jovially as she cleared her plate.

Suppressing the urge to throw up everything she had just eaten, she quietly took a sip of water. She had no strength left to argue with the duke. It didn't seem like there was any way for her to be free of him, short of dying. In fact, she wasn't even certain that death would free her of him.

With Uncle Bill gone, he had moved on to Kyle. As if that weren't enough, he was now using her baby as a way to keep her under his thumb. She didn't want to dwell on his reasons for doing this.

Whether it was out of twisted desire, obsession, or love, he was treating her like she was no more than an object for him to use or dispose of as he pleased.

“I've eaten now,” she muttered as she set down her utensils. “You saw it. I ate everything on my plate, right in front of you.”

He nodded graciously. “Certainly. Thanks to you, Kyle Ettman will not go hungry today.”

“Are you satisfied now?”

“I am,” he replied, smiling. It was a sincere-looking smile, and it clashed with the cruelness of his behavior.

“Then let me go. I want to go home. You know better than anyone that I won't be able to escape even if I go home.” She knew he wasn't going to grant her request, but she still felt like she had to make it.

“You'll just have to get used to this, Layla.”

“How am I supposed to get used to being imprisoned like this?”

“Well, you'll have to, one way or another.” He clicked his tongue as if he were talking to an unruly child. “You're going to be living the rest of your life like this, so getting used to it seems like a good idea, doesn't it?”

“What are you talking about?!”

“If you want to leave, you may. I told you I wouldn't kill you, didn't I? You just need to bear the child first.”

Crossing his legs, he cocked his head as he looked at her. When his gaze lowered and settled on her belly, she couldn't help but shudder.

“Are you really planning to take my baby from me?”

“Don't you think it's a bit harsh to put it that way? It's my baby too, after all.”

“How can you be so sure of that?” She covered her belly, as if she was worried that the fetus would hear what they were talking about. Rationally, she knew there was no need to do this, but it just didn't feel right to discuss such unsavory matters in earshot of her child. “It's funny that you think you're the only man I've been with.”

“Oh, I see, you're once again trying to tell the dreadful lie that it's not really my baby.”

“There's a lot of other men in the world besides you.”

The more serious her expression grew, the more carefree his smile became.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. I deceived you. I made you believe I was in love with you. You know how good I am at lying. If I was able to fool someone as lofty and distinguished as you, Your Grace, surely I could manage to fool an ordinary man.”

She could feel herself starting to tremble out of nervousness, but she was speaking with confidence. As he listened to her, there was a wry smile on his lips, while his eyes remained as cold as the Schulter River in the dead of winter.

“Would you like to tell me whose baby it is, then? Is it Kyle Ettman's? If so, that poor medic will have a bullet in his head before the day is out.”

“Don't drag Kyle into this!”

“If it's not Private Ettman, who is it? What's the guy's name?”

“I'll never tell you. I know what you'd do to him if I did. What I'm sure of, though, is that your steadfast belief that it's your baby is ridiculous. You're a fool. You've been deceived before, and now you're willfully persisting in this new delusion.”

*I'm sorry, Baby,* she repeated internally as she made these cold pronouncements.

This was her only remaining hope. She felt confident that he wouldn't remain fixated on a baby that didn't share his blood. However, he soon regained a calm expression and chuckled. There was no trace of anger in the sound of his laughter.

“Fine. If telling that flimsy lie brings you comfort, I'll accept it, Layla.”

“If you need to believe it's a lie to protect your flimsy self-esteem, then I will accept that, Your Grace,” she replied, not backing down. She was feeling very frightened, but she couldn't let him have the

last word. She was also trying to ensure that he would think twice before carelessly stripping the baby away from her.

“Layla…” he whispered in a sweet tone as he slowly stood up. He then walked towards her, until she and her belly were enveloped by his shadow.

# Chapter 132:
## The Only Way

“There seems to be a misunderstanding here. I really don't care about who the baby's father is.”

Matthias stopped caressing Layla's cheek and clutched her chin firmly. She tried to shake her head to free herself from him, but he easily maintained his grip.

He slowly raised her face to make her look into his eyes, then said, “No matter who the father is, what's certain is that you're the baby's mother, and you love the baby. That's all I need to know.” His eyes softened. “And Layla, if by some chance the baby isn't mine, that's all the more reason for you to keep close by it and protect it. If some other guy is father, I'm sure you understand the danger you would be placing the baby in if you were to run off and leave it with me.”

As she heard him say this, she let out a stifled cry, as if she were being strangled. Using his free hand, he started caressing her hair, as if he were petting a tamed beast.

“If it is some other guy's child, I won't feel great about it, but I doubt I'll lose much sleep over it. After all, I'll be the father of all the future children you'll bear.”

“That won't be happening!”

“You're so smart, Layla, and yet your memory is so bad. I already told you, you're going to live like this for the rest of your life.”

He stooped down to meet her gaze directly. In that moment, she understood what he had meant when he said that the old Matthias von Herhardt was dead. The Matthias who had gazed at her on that spring evening in Arvis, the last time they had seen each other there, was no more. The man in front of her now seemed like an entirely different person, and he had a wild look in his eyes.

He lightly kissed her on the forehead. Then, in a soft whisper, as if he were comforting a fretful child, he said, “Listen carefully,

Layla.”

Stiffly clasping her hands together, she looked blankly at him. Her whole body started trembling.

“You are going to live with me, as my woman, bearing my children. That will be your life.”

He kissed her once more, this time on her pale cheek.

“So you'd better get used to it, for the sake of the baby inside you, which you insist on claiming isn't mine. Don't you think?”

* * *

Layla stepped back from the closed door, looking exhausted as she panted and tried to catch her breath. Her attempt to break through the door by hammering at it with a metal candlestick had resulted in nothing but several unsightly dents. The door remained just as firmly locked as ever.

After staring at the door for a while longer, she turned away. She set the candlestick down, sat deep in a chair, and let out a long sigh. The fetus inside her, which had gone stiff as if it were frightened by the noise, started to move again.

“Don't worry, nothing's wrong. It's all right,” she said, trying to comfort it. She started stroking her belly, and she could immediately feel the fetus moving towards the spot she was touching.

She was used to it by now, but the first time she had felt the fetus moving, she had been very surprised, almost scared. Unsure what to do, she had hesitated for a moment before tentatively touching her belly. The fetus had then made another quick movement, as if in response. It was then that she had finally felt like a mother.

A wondrous, joyful feeling had filled her heart in that moment. She was a little sad that she couldn't tell anyone about the feeling, but at least she could share it with the baby inside of her. She felt like the baby knew everything.

When Layla was in a good mood, she could feel the baby dancing joyously. When she felt depressed, the baby curled up stiffly. It was

like there was a tiny version of herself inside of her. She loved her baby with all her heart. It was a love that had absolutely nothing to do with Matthias.

Once the fetus had calmed down again, Layla put her messy hair into a ponytail, and wiped the tears from her eyes before putting her glasses back on. No matter how desperate of a situation she was in, she was a mother. She was her baby's only family member and guardian.

She ate the lunch the now familiar soldier had left for her, and changed her clothes. Most of the things from her apartment had been moved to this room by now. It seemed that the duke really had no intention of letting her go.

*Think calmly,* she thought, trying to console herself as she looked around the room.

She had tried screaming for help, begging the soldiers to let her go, and now had even tried breaking down the door. None of these things had worked.

Unless the duke had a change of heart, there was no way for her to escape. She understood this rationally, and yet she didn't want to give up. She couldn't keep living like this forever. She had to protect the baby from the duke.

But how could she do that?

Just as her growing uneasiness was about to cause her to burst into tears, she heard the sound of the lock being unfastened on the other side of the door. She reflexively stood up and hurriedly lay down in bed. Feigning sleep, she closed her eyes and calmed her breathing. Meanwhile, she could hear the chains being lifted.

Lying curled up on her side, she clutched the edges of her pillow. A moment later, she heard the door open and then could sense someone walking across the room towards the bed.

From the sound of the footsteps alone she knew that the duke had returned.

* * *

Layla focused on pretending to be asleep. She had started doing this out of a desire not to have to look at Matthias, but at some point, her fear had increased even more. She was now truly afraid of him.

Oddly enough, this new fear had made her realize that, though she had always feared Duke Herhardt to some extent, the version of him that she had known back at Arvis had not been completely cold and emotionless. This was clear now, when she compared her memories of him back then to the way he was now. He had changed. It seemed that she really had destroyed some part of his soul.

*Does that mean that my wish was granted?* she wondered, recalling that she had wished that his yearning for her would become a long-term illness. Rather than being completely forgotten by him, she had wanted to leave an emotional scar with him. However, this transformation wasn't what she had wanted.

Still feigning sleep, she bit her lip, feeling like she was about to burst into tears. She could hear the sound of the duke removing his overcoat and uniform jacket and placing them on the end of the bed. She then heard him walk a few steps, and then she felt the bed shake.

Stifling the urge to scream, she clutched the edges of her pillow tightly. He then lay down behind her back and slowly pulled her deep into his embrace.

Startled, she almost struggled, but managed to resist the urge to do so. Fortunately, he didn't seem to want to do anything more than this. Thus she knew it was better to endure it than struggle. If she provoked him, there was no telling what he might do.

She prayed internally for time to pass quickly, or else that she could fall asleep immediately. However, neither of her prayers were answered. Time passed slowly, and her senses only sharpened.

He kissed her hair, earlobes, forehead, and cheeks with a feather-light touch. Just as gently, his hands stroked her neck, shoulders, and waist. Through his chest, which was pressed against her back,

she could feel the slow, steady rhythm of his heart beating. She felt frightened and sad.

His breathing then gradually slowed down, and his hands and lips stopped touching her. Once she was fairly sure he was asleep, she let out a silent sigh of relief. Even so, she lacked the courage to look behind her, so she just lay there in that position for a long while. His embrace felt as warm and cozy as ever, and this only made her feel sadder.

Once the sunlight started to redden in the late afternoon, she finally opened her eyes and looked at him. He was asleep, with a peaceful look on his face. The way his face looked now was just how she wanted to keep him in her memory, so that years from then she could describe him this way when she told her child about its father.

Of course, she had no intention of hurting the child by telling the full truth. Instead, she was going to say, *"Your father passed away while you were still in my belly. But he loved us so much."*

Even though she planned to lie like this, she wanted to convey some modicum of truth as well. Perhaps she would describe his handsome smile and blue eyes, or his gentle voice. She wouldn't go as far as to bring up any actual memories of her time with him, but she would describe brief moments and impressions like that. However, that was for a later date. Not now.

Gritting her teeth, she withdrew herself from his embrace. She knew full well that there was no hope of escaping. Even if somehow she could get out of the room, soldiers would probably catch her before she could get out of the hotel. If she were lucky enough to evade even them, she would be stuck in a city occupied by the Berg army. One way or another, she would end up back with him. Still, however, she didn't want to give up.

Just then, her eyes stopped upon something that brought her a faint ray of hope: the clothes he had taken off. Perhaps he had left the key in them!

As soon as this thought occurred to her, she hurriedly got off the

bed. Just as she was reaching for his overcoat, she saw a colorful paper box on the bedside table. She was sure it hadn't been there before. He must have just brought it. Only after opening it did she realize that she should have left it alone. It was a slice of cake. It was very pretty, and was topped with pink whipped cream.

Her hands started to tremble as she looked back and forth between the slice of cake she was holding and the sleeping duke. Her breath quickened, and her heart started pounding. A faint moan escaped her lips as she reflexively stepped back. Before she knew it, she had dropped the cake slice, and it had gotten on her clothes. She tried to clean herself up, but this only made it worse. By the time she came to her senses, her hair, hands, and even her shoes were smeared with cake.

She shook her head in distress, then quickly wiped her hands on the hem of her skirt and started searching all the pockets of his overcoat and uniform jacket. She knew it was pointless to do this, but she still wanted to. She wanted to get out of the room, even though she knew she would almost certainly get caught again.

Just as she was coming to the sad realization that the key was nowhere to be found, she heard a warm voice calling to her: “Layla...”

She raised her frightened eyes and saw Matthias sitting up in bed, leaning against the cushioned headboard. After narrowing his eyes for a moment, he smiled and slowly retrieved the key from his pants pocket. Holding it for her to see, he said, “Here it is.” As he slowly closed and opened his eyes, the smile disappeared from his face. “This is what you were looking for, isn't it?” He stared at her with eyes like those of a hungry beast.

Fearing that he was really going to kill her this time, she reflexively picked up the pistol sitting beneath his overcoat. Before she realized what she was doing, she was pointing it at him. The chilling feel of the cold metal against her hands made her want to burst into tears, but there was no going back now.

“You've gotten much better at choosing your weapon. I guess my

advice did you some good," he said in a kind tone of voice, as if he were praising a child. He seemed incredibly calm for someone who had a gun pointed at him.

"The key. Give me the key right now," she said, still pointing the pistol at him as she took a few steps towards him.

Twirling the keyring around his finger, he leaned back against the headboard. "Now you've got to undo the safety, so that you can pull the trigger."

"G-give me the key!" she shouted, choking back tears.

However, he just kept watching her with an amused look on his face, as if he were a spectator at an entertaining play. "Undo the safety, Layla."

"You think I'm joking? If you don't give me the key, I'll shoot! Give it to me right-"

"Go ahead, shoot," he said, snickering.

Gritting her teeth, she undid the pistol's safety catch to show that she was serious.

Not wavering in the slightest, he said, "Good. Now kill me." He tossed the key up in the air and caught it. "That's the only way you can escape from here."

# Chapter 133:
## A Sad, Frightening Dream

After telling Layla to shoot, Matthias closed his eyes and sat motionless, as if he was really going to let her kill him.

She gulped nervously and adjusted her grip on the pistol. She had never shot a gun before, but she had watched plenty of hunting in her day. She had seen the very man in front of her brutally kill countless defenseless animals. Now she had the opportunity to pay him back for all that cruelty.

Gritting her teeth, she placed her trembling index finger on the trigger. Even though she was standing still, aiming the pistol, she was panting like someone who had just sprinted a long distance. Tears had started to fall from her eyes as well.

A feeling of emptiness suffused first her mind, and then her whole body. Suddenly she felt very uncertain. She didn't know what this frightening, cruel, yet friendly man wanted from her. She didn't know what would become of her and her baby. She didn't know what to do, and she had no idea how to decide.

Finally, she broke down and burst into tears. He then opened his eyes and saw Layla, covered in pink whipped cream, sobbing as she held a pistol she didn't know how to use. She looked both pitiful and audacious. To him, however, she just looked beautiful. As he looked at her with a calm gaze, her crying grew louder and sadder. All the while, however, she kept the pistol aimed at him.

With a slight smile on his lips, he stood up. She started trembling so much that she lost her balance and almost fell down.

Subduing her was incredibly easy. All he did was grab her arm and give a light tug, and she collapsed forward onto the bed. He then got on top of her and effortlessly took the pistol from her. After struggling for a moment like a fish thrown ashore, she soon went limp.

“I told you to kill me,” he flatly muttered as he inspected the

pistol. Just as he had advised her to, she had undone the safety catch. “If you're not going to do it, then I'll have to, Layla.”

As she continued to sob, she heard the metallic sound of him cocking the pistol. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. Through her tear-blurred vision, she saw that he was aiming the pistol straight at her head.

Her sobbing stopped at once. After she stared blankly at him for a moment, he asked, “Shall I spare you?” His tone sounded almost benevolent.

She nodded her head in a daze. Everything felt like a dream. Even her fear vanished.

“If I do, you'd better behave,” he added, stooping down lower towards her.

Viewed from up close, his eyes were tinged with an infinite kindness. Transfixed by the sight, she nodded once more.

He snickered, and she heard the dull sound of something heavy dropping onto the floor. She looked in the direction of the sound and saw that he had tossed the pistol down. It lay in the light of the sunset, with its detached magazine lying next to it.

Her tears continued to flow, dripping onto the sheets. As relief spread through her body, she lost all her energy. Feeling even more dazed, she heard his gentle voice whisper, “Look at you, you're a mess.”

He patted her head just as gently, saying, “It's all right, Layla.” As if he were handling a very fragile object, he pulled her chin to make her face him. “I'll clean you up.”

This was the last thing she remembered him saying.

* * *

When she regained her senses, she found herself sitting in a bathtub full of warm water. Viewed through the steamy air, his face looked just as kind as it had before she had blacked out.

When they made eye contact, he asked, “Too hot?”

She shook her head in response.

She knew she hadn't fainted, and yet she couldn't remember how she had gotten here. Or rather, she did remember, but the memory didn't feel like it had happened to her.

Leaving her alone on the bed, he had gotten up and walked straight to the bathroom. While she had listened to the sound of a bath being drawn, the sun had set. All the while, she had remained motionless, lying on her back and staring at the ceiling.

Eventually he had returned to her and gently patted her head. Then he had proceeded to slowly remove her soiled clothes. It was a shameful thing to be subjected to, but she hadn't resisted. Soon even her feeling of shame had faded away. She hated everything. All she wanted was for him to stop doing the things he wanted to do and let her go instead.

As she reflected on these memories, they seemed like something from a distant world that had happened to a complete stranger, not to herself. The present moment still felt that way. Despite the fact that she was sitting naked in front of the duke, she felt no particular emotion.

“Eyes,” he whispered.

She thought for a moment before grasping his meaning. Like an obedient child, she shut her eyes, and then felt his hands on her face. Having never had a dog or other pet that he would have had to wash, he was a bit clumsy, but he seemed quite relaxed as he gently scrubbed her skin.

As his hands descended below her shoulders, she flinched. She wrapped her arms around her knees more tightly, and the anxiousness slowly returned to her eyes. The splashing sounds stopped, and the two of them stared at each other in silence.

“You've got to behave, Layla.”

He pulled her wet hair off her shoulders and chest and tucked it behind her. She shivered, as if a cold wind had just blown over her.

“You promised.”

She was staring off into space. He pulled her face towards him. When her gaze drifted away again, he made her face him again.

Her lips twitched as if she was about to say something. Instead, she resignedly lowered her arms from her breasts. As he observed the obvious changes in her body below her bony shoulders, the look on his face didn't change much. There was a momentary tinge of flustered satisfaction that faded quickly.

Pulling her face towards his again, he said, "I'll buy you another slice of that cake tomorrow."

She frowned at him. He didn't seem to realize how strange this situation was.

"You don't need to," she muttered in a tired voice.

The thought that tomorrow she would have to contend with him once again made her feel awful.

"Yes I do," he insisted, as if he didn't really care what she said. "You like it, don't you?"

"What do you care what I like or dislike?"

She raised her knees again and pressed her back against the wall of the tub. Even so, she understood that she was still under his control.

He grinned in response to her question. The grin looked so friendly, it only made her feel worse. As he reached towards her again, she noticed something on his arm.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked closely at what appeared to be a scar under the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt. It appeared to be a fairly fresh wound. It registered anew with her that he was a military officer who had engaged in fierce warfare on his way to occupying this city.

When he realized what she was looking at, he snickered and started to pull down his sleeve. However, she grabbed his arm to stop him. Examining the wound like a doctor, she whispered, "That must have hurt a lot."

He chuckled and replied, "I'm surprised to hear you say that, when moments earlier you were about to shoot me."

"…"

"It didn't hurt."

“You're lying...”

“Really.”

He lifted her hand from his arm and placed it back in the bathwater. Now that their brief exchange was over, the sounds of gentle splashing resumed.

She stared with bloodshot eyes at the surface of the water, wishing that he would stop. However, he continued leisurely washing her, as if he were playing a game. He showed no hesitation in touching her large, pregnant belly. It was as if he didn't even realize, or didn't care, that there was a baby inside.

*Did he believe me when I said it's another man's baby?* she wondered, holding her breath nervously.

The baby stopped moving as well, as if it were also feeling nervous. Matthias, meanwhile, kept casually scrubbing her body. Somehow, even though he was behaving like a servant to her, he still seemed like he was in charge.

This thought made her feel strange, and she soon closed her eyes. As she sat still, entrusting her body to his touch, her breath kept quickening.

* * *

After he finished bathing her, he toweled dry her body, put her clothes back on her, and even dried her hair for her before placing her onto the bed, which now had a clean set of sheets on it.

A vacant look remained on her face through most of the process. Occasionally she would look intently at him for a moment, but would then quickly lower her eyes or turn her head away. Other than that, she remained calm and passive, like an unwound wind-up doll.

He dimmed the lights, picked up a necktie, and returned to her side. Lying calmly, she stared at him and slowly blinked.

He caressed her cheek reassuringly, then tied the necktie firmly around her wrists. Knowing that she would struggle, he made sure to put a handkerchief underneath to prevent her from hurting

herself.

After tying the other end of the necktie to the bedpost, he pulled the covers over her body and stood up, saying, “Go to sleep.”

She struggled weakly for a moment before calming down again. The look on her face remained the same as he went back to the bathroom, took a shower, and returned. There was a blank look in her eyes, as if she didn't know what was happening to her.

He untied the knots and freed her hands. Then he tied another knot around only one of her wrists, and tied the other end of the necktie to his own wrist. This time she just passively watched him, making no attempt to resist. She looked very tired and worn out. This was understandable, given all that she had been through today.

He turned off the lights, and then lay down next to her. Their hands, tied together as one, lay on the sheets, one atop the other.

“Don't go,” he whispered as he slowly interlocked his fingers with her in the darkness. Even more quietly, he said, “Stay by my side.”

Her eyes twitched, but she remained silent. He squeezed her hand and whispered, “Sleep well, Layla.”

He then kissed her forehead with an intimate tenderness that felt worlds away from the war that surrounded them.

For a while, she gazed at the knot around their wrists and at his face, and then she closed her eyes.

In the midst of her deep sleep, she had a dream. It was a sad, frightening dream.

# Chapter 134:
## An Impossible Declaration of Love

Something had changed about the major's woman. The aide, who had seen her just about every day, had noticed a distinct shift in her demeanor. After always begging him to help her escape, or else asking how Kyle Ettman was doing, now when he entered the room she would just sit in silence, staring out the window.

She no longer refused to eat or tried to break down the door. She ate whatever he brought her, and then curled up in her seat with a blank look on her face. Her newfound submissiveness had certainly made his job easier, but he wasn't sure how to feel about that.

“I don't know how much longer she's going to last,” he said as he locked the door from the outside.

The other soldier guarding the hallway looked similarly concerned.

“The woman is acting a little strange,” the aide said. “Do you think I should tell someone?”

“Tell who?”

“Major Herhardt, I guess...” Before the words were out of his mouth, the aide realized the pointlessness of the idea. He let out a long sigh.

Major Herhardt obviously knew the woman's state better than anyone. And yet, he always seemed to be enjoying his time with her. Furthermore, the aide was hesitant to say anything. Whenever anyone asked any questions about the woman, Major Herhardt always reacted quite harshly. It had soon become an unwritten rule that no one was to mention the major's woman unless the major himself first brought her up.

“I heard that the baby she's pregnant with is Major Herhardt's,” the soldier whispered after checking to make sure no one else was in the hallway. “So I guess that means it will be the illegitimate child of Major Herhardt? Or rather, of Duke Herhardt? And I guess

she was the Duke Herhardt's mistress before she ran away? Anyway, that's what I heard."

"You heard those rumors too, huh? You know what else I heard? I heard that she was engaged to Kyle Ettman, who's the son of the Herhardt family's doctor. But then apparently Duke Herhardt-"

"Shh!" the soldier said, batting at the aide to make him stop talking. A long shadow was approaching them from the end of the hallway.

The two men had been so engrossed in gossip, they had realized too late that the subject of the gossip had appeared.

Matthias approached the frightened men at a leisurely pace. It was hard to believe that the unseemly rumors they had been sharing were about this man, when they looked at his immaculately neat uniform, his elegant bearing, and the gentle smile on his face.

They greeted him with excessive courtesy.

He responded with a quick nod before proceeding into the room where the woman was being held prisoner. The two men looked at each other and sighed before walking off, leaving the hotel hallway in silence.

* * *

Matthias placed what he had brought on the table. Layla could see plainly what it was—a stack of books—but she had no idea what his intention was in bringing it.

"You can read these if you get bored," he said in a slow and deliberate voice, as if he were educating an ignorant child. "There are some mystery novels. You like those, right?"

She said nothing in response.

"There are some books about birds, too."

She sat staring dispassionately at the spines of the books, still saying nothing.

Desserts, flowers, books—the things the duke kept bringing to the room didn't fit the situation at all. However, she lacked the energy to point this out. Besides, even if she were to point it out, she didn't

think he would acknowledge the nature of the situation in the first place.

With a blanket wrapped around her belly, she took the top book from the stack and opened it. She wasn't planning to actually read it, but rather to use it as an excuse not to look at the duke.

Sitting across the table from her, he looked at her with satisfaction. Her loosely braided hair ran down past her thin shoulder, touching her belly. He found the sight of this pregnant woman sitting reading a book in the sunlight beautiful and peaceful.

After skimming through the book's pages for a short while, she looked up at him sheepishly and asked, “Will you let me go outside just for a bit? I won't run away, I promise.”

He didn't like the sudden break in the perfect tranquility of the moment.

“I want to stop by my apartment. And I'd like to pay a visit to Uncle Bill's-”

“Layla,” he muttered, cutting her off. “You no longer have a home or a family.” He stood up, walked towards her, and put his hand to her face. “The only home you have now is with me. I'm your only family. I'm your everything now, Layla. All you need is me.”

“No! Don't talk like that. I'm-”

“It's a warzone outside. It's dangerous. You need to stay with me. I'll protect you.”

She looked out the window in frustration before looking back at him. The bombings that the city was undergoing were no more frightening to her than the duke himself was.

“You've got to think of the baby,” he added.

She frowned at this advice. Whenever he talked about the baby in her belly, he always put on a warm, friendly face. He was acting like a father who sincerely loved his future child, while in fact the fetus was nothing to him but a means of satisfying his greed.

“Please don't insult my baby like that. I hate it!” she said,

wrapping the blanket tighter around herself in the vain hope that it would prevent the baby from hearing what the duke was saying.

“Insult your baby like that?” he asked, cocking his head in mock confusion. “There seems to be some misunderstanding here, Layla. I sincerely love the baby. Thanks to the baby, I don't have to kill you, and you and I can be happy together again.”

He was speaking in a flat tone, with no trace of hostility. His matter-of-fact attitude caused her to lose the will to argue with him any further. She hid herself in silence again.

He bent over and kissed her round forehead before returning to his seat and gazing admiringly at her. Once the sun had set, he picked her up and moved her to the bed. It was then that he noticed her body temperature was a bit higher than normal.

“You've got a fever,” he said, frowning as he felt her forehead.

She shook her head and turned to lie on her side, facing away from him. “I'm going to sleep,” she muttered before tightly closing her eyes.

He sat on the edge of the bed gazing at her for a moment, and then placed the necktie on the bedside table, deciding not to tie it around her wrists. He then lay down behind her and wrapped his arms firmly around her chest.

While he lay there, holding his precious, sleeping Layla in his arms, he whispered many things to her. He told her about the home he was going to prepare for her in a place she liked. If none of the Herhardt family's mansions were to her liking, he would purchase another one, or have a new one built.

Perhaps he would buy a private island.

He could have a very tall tower built to confine her in, and the island would become their paradise. If she would just stay by his side like she was doing right now, he would give her his whole world.

“I love you,” he softly whispered in her ear.

For the time being, it was something he could only say to her while she slept, but one day he hoped to be able to say it while

gazing into her beautiful green eyes. One day, if the prison bars of her fear vanished and yet she still didn't leave him, perhaps this would be possible.

Perhaps it wouldn't be too long until that day arrived. After all, she loved the baby. Once the baby was born, she might feel that it needed a father. He would be ready to step into that role. Perhaps then she would accept him, as it would be a way to make a family for her beloved child. He knew how important family was to her.

Feeling happy, he pulled her soft hair to his face and kissed it. He then kissed her slightly feverish forehead and cheeks, and then her bony shoulder blades.

*I love you,* he mouthed silently as he let a warm sigh escape his lips.

He buried his face in the nape of her neck. The scent of fresh roses emanating from her body was as sweet as ever. The fact that he was yearning for the woman who had deceived him made him feel silly, but happy. He loved feeling her in his arms. Not knowing what to do with his feelings, he just pulled her into a tighter embrace. Her soft body tossed and turned feebly.

He smiled with sadistic pleasure, even as he felt like crying.

* * *

Layla opened her eyes and found herself immersed in the dim, reddish light of dusk. It was a peculiar feeling to wake up in this light. The previous days had already felt somewhat unreal, but this twilight made everything seem even more dreamlike.

After wiping the cold sweat from her forehead, she let out a feverish sigh and curled up her body. She stroked her belly as if to ask, *Are you all right?* The fetus moved slightly in response. This brought her relief. At the same time, however, she felt an intense, aching pain throughout her body. The mild fever and chills that had started a few days earlier had gradually grown in severity.

After losing Uncle Bill, she had managed to endure life alone in the ruined apartment. Since being abducted by the duke, however,

she had felt like her mind and body were crumbling away like a cracked dam. She hated that this was happening, but her physical state wasn't cooperating with her will.

In fact, things had been difficult and frightening for her for quite a while. She only realized that now. She hadn't been able to sleep well in the days after Uncle Bill's funeral. When it was quiet in the apartment, she had found the silence unbearable. When the night breeze blew in noisily through the broken windows, she had feared that another air raid had begun. She had tried her hardest to persevere through all of this for the sake of the baby, but at many points it had been too much for her to bear.

She hated herself for only realizing this now that she was with Matthias. Even though she had been shamefully abducted and locked up, she had found it much easier to eat and sleep peacefully than she had when she was alone. It pained her deeply to acknowledge this.

The hardest thing of all, however, was the fact that the baby seemed to like Matthias. At some point it had stopped reacting with fright to the sound of his voice, or to the feel of his touch. Sometimes it even seemed to dance joyfully in reaction to his presence.

Perhaps it wasn't that the baby liked him, but rather that it was just dazzled by the existence of another person besides its mother. It still lacked any family other than its mother, after all. This fact made her feel very sad and guilty.

She had discovered that she was pregnant with his child after running away and settling in Sienne. At first she had tried to ignore it, but she could only remain in denial for so long.

Once she accepted the reality of the situation, she had found it surprising how quickly she was able to love and accept the baby. Even though she knew what it would mean for her to bear an illegitimate child without the father's knowledge, she still loved it. Even though she knew that it would change her life forever, she still loved it. Even though she knew how sad and disappointed it would

make Uncle Bill, she still loved it.

However, she hadn't had the courage to tell Uncle Bill about it. She had worried that he would think that her desire to keep the baby arose from a lingering attachment to the duke. This thought brought her endless shame. If she had known that this feeling of shame would stick with her, she might not have kept it from Uncle Bill after all.

After suddenly losing him, the most painful regret returned to her. Had the baby been lonely? Was that why it had taken a liking to such a cruel, heartless father? She hoped not. Any attachment to the duke would only bring it pain.

At some point, she drifted back to sleep. When she awoke again, she saw Matthias. He called to her: “Layla...”

It was dark outside, and he had switched on the lamp. He seemed to be saying something to her, but she couldn't make out the words. Somehow she felt both freezing cold and burning hot at once, and she was out of breath even though she was lying still.

He called to her again, more loudly this time: “Layla...”

The baby became more active inside her. It seemed to like the sound of him calling her name.

*What if it thinks its name is Layla?*

This sudden concern seemed comical to her, so she tried to laugh, but only a feverish sigh came out of her mouth.

As he continued to call her name, the baby continued to dance excitedly inside her. However, she found it very difficult to overcome the drowsiness she was feeling, or the chills.

*I miss Uncle Bill,* she thought before sinking back into a deep sleep.

# Chapter 135:
## That Name

The surgeon looked puzzled as he inspected the patient. She had not shown any improvement in several days. Since she was pregnant, he couldn't give her the medicine he would have normally used, so it was hard to find an effective treatment. Feeling helpless, he stepped back from the bed.

“When is her fever going to break?” Major Herhardt asked.

The surgeon gulped nervously and turned to face him.

The truth was that the woman was in such a bad condition, it was surprising that she had made it this far. This level of fever wouldn't have threatened the life of a normal adult, but it was different with this patient, who was both frail and pregnant. However, the surgeon didn't have the courage to say this to the major.

The first day he had been summoned to the room, while he was talking flatly about the woman's condition, he had noticed a cold, ferocious quality to Major Herhardt's attitude as he listened, almost as if he were about to take out his pistol and put it into his mouth.

“It's still too early to say,” the surgeon finally replied. “We'll have to wait until-”

“Until when?” Major Herhardt asked. Even while speaking softly, his voice was intimidating.

Ever since the night when the woman had first fainted, the major had stayed by her bedside. He had wanted to nurse her back to help himself, and had insisted on staying with her around the clock.

Brushing her hair away from her face looking closely at her, he asked the surgeon, “If she's transferred to the rear military hospital, can she receive treatment?”

The surgeon thought for a moment, then shook his head decisively. “In her current state, I don't think she would survive the journey to the military hospital. And even if she made it there,

there aren't many treatment options for someone who's pregnant..." He trailed off when he noticed the look on the major's face.

This man, who had faced near-death countless times on the battlefield without batting an eyelash, now looked as frightened as a cornered child.

"I'm sorry, Major," the surgeon said mournfully. He had little to offer the major but his condolences.

After the surgeon left, Matthias once again knelt down at Layla's bedside. She was unconscious, and still seemed very sick. Her fever was dangerously high, and hadn't gone down for days. Most of that time, she had been sleeping. During the brief moments when she had regained consciousness, he had barely managed to get her to swallow a single spoonful of porridge. Usually she would just mutter something and then limply fall into a deep sleep again.

However, he wasn't going to give up. Determined to make her fever break, he diligently wiped her sweat away with a damp washcloth, and tried to feed her porridge whenever possible. When he did manage to get her to swallow a spoonful or two, she would usually throw it up again. He would then patiently change her clothes and start over again, wiping her sweat away and offering her more porridge.

Breathing hot, shallow breaths, she struggled to open her eyes.

Seeing that she was awake, he calmly whispered, "It's all right, Layla. You'll get better very soon."

Looking at him with unfocused eyes, she smiled weakly and muttered, "Uncle Bill…"

She seemed to be seeing things.

"Layla."

"Can Kyle come over for dinner tonight...?"

*Kyle.* Matthias froze when he heard her warmly mutter that name in her half-conscious state.

She continued to make fragmentary comments like this. She seemed to be reminiscing about her time living in the cottage at Arvis, back when she helped Bill Remmer tend to the flowers in the

garden, and did her homework with Kyle Ettman, and chatted with both of them at the dinner table. Immersed in those memories, she seemed happy. A faint smile appeared on her flushed, feverish face.

After enjoying the hallucinations for a while, she sank back into a deep sleep. Instead of waking her, he dipped the lukewarm washcloth into the basin. His knuckles turned white as he wrung it out.

That night, she called out several times for people who weren't there: her mother, her father, Uncle Bill, and Kyle. However, not once did she call out for Matthias.

* * *

The military vehicle carrying Riette von Lindman stopped in front of the hotel on Sienne's city square. There was a group of young soldiers sitting together, smoking cigarettes and chatting. They looked like friends having a peaceful, leisurely afternoon, not soldiers in the midst of a war. Riette's face brightened at the sight.

“Riette Lindman!” an aristocratic officer shouted. Smiling, he walked towards Riette. “Looks like you've made it through the war in one piece so far.”

“So have you, I see,” Riette replied. Looking around, he added, “Looks like you've been quite lucky.”

The two men continued laughing and catching up with each other as they walked into the hotel and took their seats at the bar on the first floor.

Now that the Berg army had achieved its primary goal of capturing and occupying Sienne, the next plan was to regroup and advance westward to attack Lovita's capital. Before that, however, the soldiers, who had fought tirelessly to achieve victory so far, were being given a short vacation in this warm resort city in the south. No one had believed the Berg emperor when he had solemnly declared that the war would be won soon enough for the soldiers to return to their families before the new year. At the current rate of success, however, it seemed like it might work out

that way after all.

Taking a sip of fragrant brandy, Riette casually asked the most pressing question on his mind: “How's Matthias?”

Riette's post was at a supply unit in the rear. The only reason he had traveled all the way here was to see his cousin, Major Herhardt.

At this question, the mischievous smile faded from the other officer's face, and was replaced with a look of awkward embarrassment. “Well...”

“What's the matter? Did something happen to him? I didn't hear any news about him suffering injuries on the battlefield.”

“No, it's not that. Matthias is safe. It's just... Well, something strange is going on. Everyone's been talking about it.”

“Oh really?” Riette replied. “What has that boring guy gotten into?”

“He abducted a pregnant Lovitan woman.”

“What...?” Riette asked, doubting his ears.

“You heard me. It was surprising enough to find out that the lofty Duke Herhardt was lusting after a pregnant woman from the occupied territory, but what was really shocking was...” He frowned and let out a sigh. “You know, it won't do for me to describe it to you.”

“Come on,” Riette said, “Are you really going to set me up like that and not follow through?”

“Room 308. Go see for yourself. You need to see it with your own eyes.” The officer downed the rest of his drink and sighed again, shaking his head.

Riette looked at him with narrowed eyes for a moment, then picked up his luggage and left the bar.

As he went upstairs and walked down the hallway to the room, he assumed his friend had been exaggerating. Perhaps he was intoxicated from the day drinking, or was suffering from mental disturbance from the war. Either of those possibilities seemed more likely than the thought of Matthias von Herhardt doing something scandalous. However, he soon found out that the officer had not

been exaggerating at all.

As soon as he knocked on the door, it opened. The military surgeon on the other side stepped back with surprise when he saw him.

“Where's Matthi-”

“Open your eyes! Open your eyes! Right now!”

The hoarse shouts coming from inside the room cut Riette's question off. The surgeon ran urgently back into the room, and Riette followed him.

Once inside the room, he saw a man in such a disheveled state that it was hard to believe it was Duke Herhardt, shaking the shoulders of a woman lying on the bed and shouting wildly at her. He couldn't believe the state Matthias was in—his face was haggard, his eyes were bloodshot, and his shirt was wrinkled.

“You can't do that, Major! The patient needs to rest! All right?” the surgeon said, grabbing Matthias's arm.

Matthias shook off the surgeon's hand, ignoring him, and continued to shout at the unconscious woman. “You think you can escape me by dying? Don't you dare!”

Riette ran towards the bed and asked, “What's the matter, Matthias? What in the world is...” Before he could finish his sentence, he gasped and stepped backwards. He recognized the small woman lying on Matthias's bed. It was Layla Llewellyn.

While Riette reeled from the shock, Matthias lunged at her again. “If you run away by dying, I'll follow you into death. Even in death, you're mine! Got it?”

As he screamed at the unconscious woman, Matthias seemed like a cornered beast staring down the barrel of a hunter's gun, overwhelmed with fear and relying only on instinct.

Riette started to feel dizzy and almost fell down. He couldn't process what he was witnessing. The Matthias he knew had lived his whole life like a successful, well-fed predator. He had assumed he would always remain like that.

“Open your eyes right now. Open your eyes before I kill your

beloved Kyle Ettman, Layla!" His hoarse voice was shaking.

While Layla had previously been going in and out of brief moments of consciousness, since the previous night she had been lying as still as a corpse, and had not awoken at all. Her breathing had gradually grown rougher and more labored.

Matthias had viewed her firmly shut eyes as a sign of her stubborn refusal of him, as if she was intentionally choosing death as a way to get away from him. This had driven him to a state of wild desperation.

Amid her heavy breathing, Layla muttered, "Uncle Bill..."

Rendered speechless, Matthias sat down on the side of the bed.

Smiling, Layla called out to Bill Remmer a few more times, as if he were there in the room with her, and then she lost consciousness again.

Matthias looked blankly around the room. He knew that it was the middle of the day, but he couldn't see the light. He felt like he was surrounded by utter darkness. Suddenly he started to wonder if the gardener was trying to steal Layla away and take her to the afterlife with him. He knew that it was an absurd thought, but it filled him with fear nonetheless. First the gardener had taken Layla from Arvis and brought her here to escape Matthias. Now that Matthias had tracked her down, was the gardener taking her away from him again…?

"Layla..." Matthias muttered, placing his trembling hand to her feverish cheek. "Layla, please..."

When his fingers brushed against her dry, parched lips, a gentle expression fell over her face and she started whispering again.

"Uncle Bill..." she said. It seemed that she had encountered the gardener again. She then proceeded to say, "Kyle..." There was a bright smile on her face now, as if she were reliving happy memories with that boy.

As Matthias looked at this woman who was looking joyful even as she seemed to be on the brink of death, he couldn't help but see the bright-eyed little girl that she had once been, wandering cheerily

around Arvis. He had abducted her because he wanted her to be his, but she had never really been his. And now, perhaps, he had killed her.

“Matthias,” Riette said, putting his hand on his cousin's shoulder.

Only then did Matthias realize that Riette was there. However, the recognition only lasted a brief moment. After staring blankly at Riette for a moment, Matthias pushed his hand away and returned to Layla. His hand ran frantically from her sweat-soaked hair, to her flushed cheeks, to her slender neck, before dropping weakly to his side. In a low voice, he then said, “Bring Ettman here. Right now.”

* * *

“Kyle Ettman!”

Kyle raised his head at the sound of someone urgently calling his name. The military police officer who had first placed him in jail was hurrying towards him.

“You have to come out right away, Private Ettman.”

“I thought I still had a few days left in my sentence,” Kyle stiffly replied.

“Shut up and come with me. You've been given an assignment that will take the place of your remaining sentence. So come on!”

“An assignment? What are you talking about?”

“It's Major Herhardt's orders.”

So the very man who had ordered for his imprisonment in this storage area was now calling for his release. Kyle was about to snicker, when the officer continued.

“The woman the major brought here is really sick, and they need your help. So get up, Private Ettman. Right away!”

# Chapter 136:
## My Dream Has Come True

“There's not much that we can do for the patient at this point, Major,” the surgeon said with an awkward look on his face. It was hard to have to keep repeating the same response day after day while his superior officer was steadily growing colder and more impatient.

“Why?” Major Herhardt replied, as he always did.

“As you know, she's pregnant, so we can't use the medicine that we normally would use in a case like this. If we did, the fetus could-”

“I'm asking about Layla right now,” Matthias said, cutting him off. This was something he hadn't said before, and it changed the flow of the conversation.

While the surgeon contemplated how to reply, Matthias rose from his chair. Kyle then entered the room, glaring fiercely at Matthias as soon as he caught sight of him. Matthias, on the other hand, looked back at Kyle with utter calmness.

The first time Kyle had been summoned to the room, a rough fight had broken out between him and Matthias. The moment Kyle had seen Layla lying unconscious on the bed, he had lunged wildly at Matthias.

It was a one-sided fight, with Kyle attacking and Matthias only defending. Having already served time in the makeshift prison in the hotel's basement, Kyle at this point didn't care if he would be court-martialed and executed for attacking his superior officer like this. As far as he was concerned, if he were able to kill that devil, it would be worth it.

However, no matter how much he screamed and swung his fists at Matthias, Matthias only calmly deflected his blows, while uttering the simple phrase, *“Save Layla.”*

Kyle couldn't believe it. The duke had tormented Layla endlessly,

pushing her towards death's door himself, and now he dared to give such an order. And yet, Kyle didn't have the strength to refuse the order.

It was Layla, after all. Order or no order, he would have done anything in his power to save Layla's life. However, nothing he had tried so far had worked. Layla's condition had not improved at all. Occasionally she would regain consciousness for a moment, recognize Kyle, and talk to him as if she had been transported back to their childhood days, but that was it.

“I'm not talking about the baby, I'm talking about Layla, Doctor,” Matthias said, shifting his gaze from Kyle back to the surgeon. “I want you only to think of Layla. Come up with a way to make Layla better.”

“But Major, the mother and the fetus are not separate. We have to consider their health together if we are to-”

“Give her medicine,” Matthias firmly said.

A look of bewilderment passed over the faces of the others in the room. The surgeon didn't know what to say.

“Give her medicine right now,” Matthias repeated. “Lower her fever and bring her back to consciousness.”

Kyle then intervened. “She's already in her second trimester of pregnancy. A strong medicine could cause her to miscarry.”

“So?” Matthias replied, frowning slightly as he looked down at Layla, who was unconscious and struggling to breathe. “Go get the medicine, Ettman.”

“Are you proposing that we kill the baby?”

“I don't care what happens to the baby.”

“How can you say such a-”

“Save Layla,” Matthias said in the same callous tone he had maintained throughout.

He was speaking from his heart. He knew that if the baby were to die, he would no longer have any way to make Layla stay with him. His last sliver of hope would slip away.

This consideration had made him hesitate up to this point.

However, now that it seemed likely that she would die if they didn't do something, he didn't care about forcing her to stay with him. He was willing to put up with the hell of being without her, as long as she survived. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing else to consider.

“How can you so casually say that you want to kill your child? And without even thinking of how Layla would feel?!” Kyle shouted angrily, having run out of patience.

Riette, who had been sitting off in the corner, stood up. “He's right, Matthias. You've got to think about succession. We're in the middle of a war. If the baby that Miss Llewellyn is carrying is yours, you've got to save it.” He was looking at Matthias with a serious expression on his face. “If by some chance you end up dying on the battlefield, and if the baby turns out to be a boy, then he will be the one and only heir to the House of Herhardt.”

Riette was offering the cold, calculated considerations typical of aristocratic society. Continuity in the line of succession was of paramount importance for prestigious aristocratic families, and the House of Herhardt was considered the most prestigious family in the entire Berg Empire.

“Think rationally,” Riette said more forcefully.

Matthias glanced briefly at Kyle and Riette, who were standing in his way, and then turned to face the surgeon again. The heavy silence was broken by Matthias's calm voice saying, “Go get the medicine. Save Layla.” It was as if these were the only words Matthias knew how to say.

* * *

*My dream has come true!*

As impossible as it seemed, Layla realized with joy that the dream she had held deep in her heart had become a reality.

It was the beginning of summer, when Arvis's forest was its most beautiful shade of green.

She was riding her bicycle excitedly towards the cottage. She was

wearing the Gillis Girls' School summer uniform, a blue dress, and the hem of its skirt was flapping in the same breeze that was making the whole forest sway.

Her old bicycle creaked to a stop in front of the shed in the front yard of the cottage. She hopped off and scurried into the cottage. In no time, she had changed her clothes and come back outside again.

Wearing her wide-brimmed straw hat and holding a huge basket, she walked with happy steps deep into the woods. Kyle would be coming over soon for a study session together. Before he arrived, she was going to pick as many raspberries as she could. She wanted to make sure she could make enough raspberry jam before summer was over, so that she would be able to afford to buy a pair of glasses.

It was the start of the summer of her eighteenth year, when her days were happy and full of joy.

She hummed to herself as she picked the raspberries. Now and then, she considered what to make for dinner. *I've got to make something that both Uncle Bill and Kyle will like. Maybe I should have asked Uncle Bill to catch a chicken this morning.*

As she continued to diligently pick raspberries, she soon found herself by the river. A breeze full of the scent of the river tickled her sweat-beaded forehead.

*Now every day is going to be like this,* she thought with delight. *Now that my dream has come true, I'll be able to live these days forever.*

Just as her heart was filling with joy at this happy thought, she heard the sound of a child crying. *That's strange. No kids live around here.* As improbable as it seemed, the sound was too loud and clear for her to have misheard it.

She hesitated for a moment, then set down the heavy basket and walked towards where the sound was coming from. Before long, she was face-to-face with a young child she didn't recognize. The cute little child was about the same age she had been when her mother had abandoned her, and was walking along the riverside alone, sobbing.

Layla stepped back, feeling confused.

*I don't know who you are...*

She shook her head, trying to calm her pounding heart.

*I've got to get back to the cottage. Uncle Bill will be getting home soon. I have to make dinner for the three of us. But... who's the kid? Why the tears?*

Feeling like she was about to burst into tears herself, she took another step back. Meanwhile, the child's sobbing grew louder.

*What do I do?*

She bit her lip nervously. The child's crying grew louder and louder, until she couldn't hear anything else. It was then that she opened her eyes.

Her vision, blurry at first from the fever, gradually became clearer, until she saw a pair of blue eyes looking at her. Soon she recognized these eyes as belonging to Matthias, and then she realized that his large, strong hands were clutching her chin, forcing her mouth open. A moment later, she felt something cold and smooth touching her chapped lips. It was a medicine bottle.

* * *

An ear-splitting scream filled the hotel room. Layla was screaming with such vehemence, it was hard to believe that only a moment earlier she had been lying lifeless on the bed.

“Layla!” Kyle shouted, struggling as the surgeon and Riette held him back.

Everyone in the room looked highly distressed except for Matthias, who was staying amazingly calm as he held Layla down and poured the medicine down her throat.

“It's all right. Everything will be better very soon,” he whispered as if he were comforting a child. After subduing her reckless struggling, he placed the bottle to her lips again.

However, she then started resisting even more fiercely, screaming like an animal being led to the slaughterhouse.

“Stop! Go away! Don't do this!”

“Don't be stubborn, Layla.”

“My baby! My family! How dare you kill my family?!”

He furrowed his brow deeply as he watched her screaming in anger. “You've got to let go, or you'll die too.” The emotion soon faded from his face, and he forced her mouth open again.

Not knowing what else to do, she gnawed and scratched at his hands, and started sobbing. However, he remained unfazed.

“S-save the baby,” she pleaded, grabbing his finger.

Her hand was as frail as a dry twig, but she was desperately clutching at him with all her strength. It would still have been easy for him to proceed, but her earnestness made him pause.

“I l-lied to you. It's our baby. Okay?” Her tears fell unceasingly, soaking her fever-flushed face.

“I know,” he replied without hesitation.

He had known the baby was his from the start, never doubting this for a moment. However, this knowledge did not in the slightest affect his decision to kill the baby in order to save Layla.

She stared at him uncomprehendingly. The look of determination in his eyes did not waver.

“But it's... your baby,” she muttered. *Is he going to kill the baby even though he knows it's his? How can he do that?* “It's really yours.”

“…”

“It'll probably look just like you.”

“…”

“You know, it likes you. Our baby likes you,” she said, growing more and more desperate as he remained silent.

He couldn't understand any of this. He had no idea why she was saying the things she was saying. Even if the baby resembled him, even if, as she perplexingly claimed, the baby liked him, none of that was important.

Previously, he had cherished the baby as a means to keep Layla by his side. Now, however, the baby was no more to him than a creature trying to take Layla away from him. He could not tolerate such a creature, even if it was his own offspring.

He practically climbed on top of Layla, putting the bottle to her lips again.

“No! Stop! Don't kill the baby! Let me die! If the baby is going to die, I want to die too!” she screamed, struggling with all her might. “If my baby is gone and I'm completely alone in this world, I won't be able to go on living. So... please.” She now lacked even the strength to keep her eyes open, but she clung to him and pleaded with all her heart.

As he looked down at her, his face sank. *What about me?* he thought. A scowl appeared on his face. *I'll still be around, and yet she says that she'll be completely alone. Am I nothing to her?* As he continued to stare at her, the bottle slipped out of his hand, shattering when it hit the floor. He snickered and said, “If you want to save the baby, you have to survive.” He blinked slowly, and then looked straight into her eyes. “If you give your life to save the baby, the baby will die as well. Because I will kill it.”

He clutched her face. She stared at him with unfocused eyes, saying nothing.

“Listen carefully, Layla. You need to live. If you want to save your baby, then you need to live. Do you understand?”

His hand started shaking as he tightened his grip on her face. She weakly nodded a few times before losing consciousness again.

He continued shaking her until Riette, unable to bear this nightmarish scene any longer, ran at him and dragged him out of the room.

Everyone who had witnessed the spectacle understood that if the woman died, he was going to kill his own child.

# Chapter 137:
## If I Can't Be Your Heaven

A strange sort of order developed between Matthias and Kyle. When Layla was conscious, Kyle would stay by her bedside; when she returned to her deep sleep, Matthias would take Kyle's place. This routine had arisen naturally, without either of the men planning it.

Over the course of a few days, Layla's fever had gradually gone down. The surgeon was greatly relieved to discover that she didn't have pneumonia, which would have been the worse-case scenario and could have been fatal. The surgeon had good reason to worry that if the woman were to die, the major might have killed him.

“What remains now is the patient's will and her strength,” he cautiously advised the major, who was holding the sleeping woman's hand. “As much as possible, it's important to make her feel at ease, not frightened or anxious.” He knew that he was risking his life by saying this to the major, but it was essential advice for the sake of saving the woman's life.

Saying nothing in response, Matthias let go of her hand and stood up. Just then, Kyle entered the room with a meal for her.

As the two rivals stood facing each other, the surgeon gulped nervously several times. He had heard all the rumors about Duke Herhardt and the Herhardt family doctor's son, as well as the woman the duke had abducted. Based on what he had observed over the past several days, these rumors seemed to be largely accurate. He couldn't openly acknowledge this, however, which made things quite awkward for him.

Luckily, the silent confrontation didn't last long. Matthias stepped away from the bedside, and Kyle took his place. Soon thereafter, Layla opened her eyes.

A bright smile spread across her face when she saw Kyle. “Kyle… Did you bring the geometry notes?” she muttered. She seemed to be

confusing dreams and reality once again.

Kyle gladly played along. “Of course I brought them. I don't think you'd let me eat dinner with you if I hadn't.”

“Oh, come on. That's not true.”

“Let's eat, Layla.”

“But Uncle Bill's not home yet.”

“Oh, he... said he's going to be a little late.”

Kyle furtively wiped away the tears that were forming in his eyes, then smiled even more brightly.

Matthias watched the two of them from a distant corner of the room.

“Oh, I see,” Layla said, smiling like an innocent young girl. Kyle then started carefully feeding her the lukewarm porridge he had brought. It was a cozy, peaceful scene.

After watching for a while, Matthias quietly turned and left the room. Dazzlingly bright sunlight streamed in through the windows in the hallway. A bitter smile appeared on his dry lips.

* * *

Matthias re-entered the room late that night. Kyle had already departed, so the room was empty other than Layla, who was fast asleep.

As her fever had dropped little by little, her breathing had grown smoother. Thus Matthias was able to gaze at her in deep silence for a long while. There was a calm expression on her face. Perhaps she was having a pleasant dream. He didn't know what her dream was about, but he did know one thing: he wasn't in it.

Not wanting to dwell on this unpleasant thought, he got up and went to the bathroom. After taking a longer-than-usual shower, he emerged from the bathroom to find Layla awake. Staring quietly at the ceiling, she looked like an innocent child.

He hesitated for a moment, then walked over to her. Just as he expected, once she saw him, a look of dread spread across her face.

“D-don't,” she said, recoiling as he lifted the covers from her

body.

Ignoring her reluctance, he proceeded to remove her pajamas.

As he sponged down her sweaty body, she flailed her arms weakly in an attempt to resist. Once she realized that she was powerless to stop him, she hid her face in her hands.

It wasn't that there were no women available to wash Layla's body. There were plenty of capable nurses at the military hospital. Matthias just didn't want to use them. He bristled at the thought of someone else seeing or touching her body, even a woman.

He carefully washed her gaunt, trembling body. His eyes twitched briefly when he touched her pregnant belly.

Even as the rest of her body had become more and more emaciated, the fetus had continued to grow. He had hoped that she would have a miscarriage, so that she could be given proper treatment, but the fetus had stuck it out.

Observing the way it was stubbornly persisting in draining the life out of its mother, he was sure that the baby was his. As he reflected on the fact that Layla, who hated him so much, loved the baby enough that she was willing to sacrifice her own life for it, he was filled with jealousy. He shook his head, realizing how much he bitterly envied his own child. He felt the same hateful envy towards Kyle Ettman, and towards the late Bill Remmer. And not only them. He even felt the same way towards the birds, flowers, and trees that Layla loved. These thoughts made him feel miserable and pathetic, but he couldn't stop thinking them.

*Should I get rid of all of them?* he thought to himself. He knew it was an absurd idea, but it brought him some small relief to fantasize about ridding the world of everyone and everything Layla loved. With those distractions out of the way, perhaps she would finally be able to love him. It was a wild, outlandish idea, and yet he knew he was capable of carrying it out.

This led him to another realization: that at some point, his love was going to cause Layla to die. That was just how his love worked. He didn't know any other way to love her, and he didn't think he

ever would.

He snapped out of his disturbed reflections and set aside the washcloth. A sullen look hung on his face as he dressed her in a new set of pajamas and pulled the covers back over her.

Brushing her hair from her forehead and cheeks, he whispered, “Go to sleep.”

Holding her breath, she nodded and shut her eyes. He could tell she wasn't sleeping. She just had her eyes closed to avoid him. He knew that she feared and hated him. Nonetheless, he enjoyed gazing at her, so he stayed by her side.

* * *

Layla woke up and found herself in Matthias's embrace. The sun was shining brightly through the windows. It seemed to be morning.

As her mind became clear, hazy memories from the night started to come back to her.

She recalled grumbling in a half-asleep state, saying that she wanted to go outside, that it was stuffy inside and she wanted to get some fresh air. She seemed to recall Matthias listening to her with an uncharacteristically concerned, sympathetic look on his face. She wasn't sure if this had been real, or just a dream, however.

She shifted her gaze from the sky outside the open window to Matthias. He was sitting deep in a chair by the window, holding her in his arms. He was running his fingers up and down her spine with a touch as gentle as the sea breeze.

“Layla,” he whispered, seeming to have realized that she was awake. He lowered his gaze from the distant sky to look at her and once again whispered in a sweet tone, “Layla.” As always, he seemed to relish her name as it passed through his lips. “The baby is safe. That's why I'm happy right now.” As he spoke about the baby he had tried to kill, his voice was just as sweet as when he had called Layla's name.

Feeling a little hopeful, she looked into his eyes. *I guess he doesn't*

*hate his own child after all. He only made that choice because his judgment got clouded in the heat of the moment. But he really-*

"I'm happy, because I need the baby alive in order to maintain possession of you," he said in an even gentler tone, crushing her hope. "As happy as I am, though, I'm also upset. I'm upset that you, who hate me so much, love my baby. I can't stand that. I like the baby to the extent that it will function as shackles to keep you from escaping me. When I think of the baby as something that you love, however, I hate it."

She looked at him, bewildered. Perhaps it was because of the excessively bright sunlight, but his smiling face looked almost unreal.

*Am I in the middle of a fever dream?* she wondered. *I hope so. No father should speak that way about his own child.*

"I know it shouldn't be this way, but I want to lock you up again," he continued. "I don't care if I have to hold the baby hostage and place you in a high tower somewhere. I'm willing to do anything in order to have you for myself. And I won't regret a thing. I won't regret ruining your life, taking something precious away from you, or even bringing misfortune upon my own offspring. Even now, it pains me to know that I've made you ill, but I'm happy that I get to have you in my arms."

She held her breath. The baby, which had been moving energetically in response to the sound of its father's voice, calmed down as well.

"This is just how I am, Layla. I will be a monster towards you like this forever. And one day this monster is going to make you die. I'll still love you, though, even if I kill you. So..." Trailing off with a sigh, he grabbed a handful of her golden hair, pressed it to his face, and slowly kissed it.

Despite all his posturing, he knew deep down that he could never harm even a single strand of her hair. Even when he had resolved to find her and kill her, he had already known this. He had told himself that if he couldn't have her, he was going to put an end to

his intense longing by ending her life. Even in that moment, however, he had known he was lying to himself. She was his ruler, his queen. There was no way he could kill her.

Seeing that she was trembling with fear, he slowly caressed her face to soothe her nerves. She could tear his heart to pieces with her bare hands, and he would sit back with a foolish smile on his face and let her. If his love for her was the poison that would kill her, then there was only one thing he could do for his queen.

“Go, Layla.”

Letting the handful of hair fall from his fingers like a golden wing, he put his hand to her cheek. The sight of her face still drove him wild with desire. This made him all the more certain that he needed to say this to her. If he were to let this moment pass, he might not ever be able to say it again.

“You need to get well as fast as you can, and then leave me,” he said, forcing the painful words out of his mouth.

These words felt like he was issuing his own death sentence. Even as he uttered them, however, he maintained the smile on his face.

He loved everything about her.

He even loved seeing her when she was teary-eyed and distraught. Even though his obsession with her made him miserable, he loved the hell that he had created for himself. Even in this moment, he ardently longed to be able to live in that hell along with Layla and their child. That's what he was. A monster who had imprisoned Layla.

However, he also knew that the woman he loved so much, the woman he desperately wanted to possess, was not just some woman. She was Layla, and was as beautifully free-spirited as a bird. She was the girl whose life he had read and read about while sitting alone in the cottage on that rainy day.

“If I can't be your heaven, Layla... then I will let you go.”

Even if he let her go, he had no idea how much longer his love for her would last. Probably for a long, long time. Perhaps it would continue to torment him for the rest of his life. Even so, he wouldn't

blame her for it. He would continue to love her, and would endure all the pain that the love caused him. *My beloved Layla, please…*

"So, go." His voice was as gentle as a soft breeze.

She stared at him in a daze.

"Fly away from me and find your heaven."

*Fly away before my love for you makes me kill you,* he thought. Rather than saying this, however, he just kissed her forehead.

In that moment, Layla became certain that she was dreaming, and a smile spread across her face. The baby inside her once again started dancing like a flower petal swaying in the breeze.

It was a beautiful dream, even though it was a little sad.

# Chapter 138:
## That Beautiful Day

Layla's fever had gone down, but she couldn't stay awake with a clear mind for long. She still spent most of her time in a deep sleep.

Even though she seemed to have made it through the worst part of her illness, Kyle remained uneasy. He was still only a fledgling medical student, but he had years and years of experience watching his father work. With patients in conditions like Layla's, one couldn't be sure that they would recover simply because their fever had broken.

"Uncle Bill…" she whispered, fidgeting slightly in her sleep.

She seemed to be dreaming about the past again. As long as she was sick, all that Kyle could do for her was stay by her side.

What could he do once she was fully recovered? This question made him even more anxious. There was no way he could simply leave her with the duke. However, he knew the duke wouldn't simply let her go.

He considered deserting the military and taking Layla with him. When he considered how this extreme measure would play out, however, his despair only deepened. With the entire continent swept up in war, there was nowhere they could escape to. Besides, she was pregnant.

He tried saying the name that she had been calling out for: "Uncle Bill..." His voice cracked with emotion as he said it.

*If Bill were alive right now, what would he have wanted?* he wondered. No matter how much he thought about it, he had no idea. One thing was certain, however. After escaping from Arvis with Layla and coming all the way here to Sienne, Bill would never have wanted her to fall back into the duke's clutches again.

*So think, Kyle, think of a way to help her,* he told himself, clutching his hair.

Just then, the door opened, and he saw just the person he

expected to see: Matthias von Herhardt.

Kyle intentionally disrespected him by refraining from saying hello, but the duke didn't seem to mind. In fact, he barely seemed aware of Kyle's presence at all. From the moment he entered the room, his eyes remained fixed solely on Layla.

He approached the bed and started caressing her cheek. It made Kyle sick to see him looking at her and touching her with such intimacy, as though he thought she belonged to him.

Just as he was about to say something, the duke spoke first: “We need to talk.”

“What is it?” Kyle replied.

“It's not something that we should discuss here,” the duke replied. Brushing Layla's hair back behind her ear, he stood up.

“But we can't just leave Layla alone in...”

Before Kyle could finish voicing his objection, he saw a young military nurse step through the open doorway.

“I think we can leave her without worry now, Ettman,” Matthias said to the stunned Kyle.

“I have nothing to say to you, Major Herhardt,” Kyle said.

Matthias's face shifted the moment he heard Kyle address him by his military title. “You seem to misunderstand me, Private Ettman. This is not a request. It's an order. A direct order from your superior officer.”

Kyle realized too late that he had stepped into a trap.

Matthias turned towards the door before Kyle had the chance to make a reply. Kyle hesitated for a moment, and then followed him out.

They proceeded to have a surprisingly long conversation.

* * *

There was a congenial atmosphere at the meeting held at the Sixth Infantry's headquarters. After years of preparation, the military's plans were proceeding without a hitch, and the key goal of occupying Sienne had been achieved ahead of schedule. This

seemed to definitively refute the cowards who had argued for avoiding war at all costs.

“With the Fourth Infantry advancing towards the western front, we have decided to keep the Sixth Infantry here in the occupied area for the time being, where it will function as a reserve force, maintaining the stability of the rear supply line,” General von Delman announced, standing in front of a map. The lanky, monocled man was in his sixties, but looked as hale and hearty as someone many years younger. “Furthermore, it's important that we quash those troublesome guerilla fighters as swiftly as possible.” His eyes narrowed as he used his pointer to trace the supply route extending from Berg to the southern end of Lovita.

Lovitans in the occupied area had been opposing the Berg military by blocking roads and cutting telephone lines. Occasionally they had gone as far as to attack supply vehicles or snipe at Berg troops, which had especially raised the general's ire.

“We have simply been too lax in our management of the occupied area,” General von Delman muttered regretfully. He had consistently expressed the need to manage the occupied area by driving fear into the hearts of its inhabitants. The emperor and crown prince, however, had not been willing to retract their strict order requiring the military to respect the rules laid down in the international treaty.

Matthias sat upright in his chair, listening carefully as the general told of the upcoming plans and strategies. Barring a drastic change in the battlefield situation, it seemed that he would remain stationed in Sienne for at least the next few weeks.

During that time, he needed to send Layla away. Thinking about this, his breathing faltered momentarily, but he quickly regained his composure.

The general scanned the faces of all the commanding officers present, before fixing his gaze on Matthias. “Major Herhardt. As you know, the guerillas, protected by international treaty, have severed our communications. We thus need a messenger to report to the

rear about our situation on this front. I believe that you will be most fitting for the job. After all, you know the emperor and crown prince well." The look on the general's face showed that he had already made up his mind about this, and wasn't interested in Matthias's opinion on the matter.

The crown prince was commanding the Eighth Infantry in the rear. He was notorious for being hard to deal with, so the choice of messenger was very important.

"Yes, General," Matthias replied, accepting the assignment without hesitation.

He was sure that Layla would benefit from having him gone for a while. He himself would benefit from it as well, perhaps even more than she would.

The general looked relieved at Matthias's coolheaded acceptance of the assignment. Having heard rumors about the major's strange behavior, he had worried about his mental stability, but it appeared that his worries were unfounded. He decided to scrap his plan to lecture about the importance of dignified behavior in aristocratic officers, and instead wrapped up the meeting a little early. It seemed that the young officers had the enemy forces to thank for this, specifically the bothersome guerilla fighters.

"The situation is quite urgent, so we should depart as soon as possible," the general said with his hand to his throbbing brow. With that, he left the conference room.

Matthias put on his officer's cap and stood up. After adjusting his already-immaculate uniform, he walked out of the building into the dazzling sunlight. It was another bright, sunny day. He snickered at himself for making such an obvious observation, but he didn't lose his soldierly bearing even for a moment.

A driver rushed over to him and said, "We're ready to depart, Major."

Matthias nodded and walked towards where the military vehicles were waiting. His car departed from the square at once.

* * *

The unfamiliar child was still wandering through the forest, crying. He was now close enough for his sobbing to be audible from the cottage.

*Is he waiting for his mother?* Layla wondered as she sat on a chair on the porch. She was very familiar with the sadness that came from one's mother never returning. If that was the child's situation, she felt very sorry for him.

Even so, she hesitated to go find him again. She wasn't sure why, but she felt like she shouldn't approach him.

“Uncle Bill, Uncle Bill!” she shouted, hurrying towards Bill, who had just returned to the cottage, pushing a wheelbarrow. The skirt of her school uniform flapped in the breeze as she walked. “There's a child in the woods,” she said.

“I know. I heard him,” Bill replied as he started to lift his dirt-covered tools out of the wheelbarrow.

“He keeps crying... What should we do?” she asked, rubbing her hands together nervously. “I think he's waiting for his mother, but he's been waiting for quite a long time.”

“Then why don't you go find him and see how he is?”

“Me?” she asked, startled by the suggestion. “But... I don't know him.”

“Strange that you would say that,” he replied, laughing heartily. “Layla, do you really not recognize that kid? I'm pretty sure I know who he is...”

“Really? Who is it?”

“Well...” he replied, smiling mischievously. “Why don't you go find him? You'll recognize him once you see him.” With that, he carried his tools with him into the shed.

She thought about following after him, but then changed her mind and started walking in the direction of the boy's cries.

When she found the boy, he was crouched on the side of the forest path, whimpering, while birds sang all around the summer woods.

After hesitating for a moment, she greeted him warmly, saying, “Hi there, little boy.”

He lifted his head and looked at her. His moist, blue eyes shone like gems.

“What are you doing here alone?” she asked, taking a cautious step towards him. “Where's your mom?”

*Who is he?* she wondered. The more she thought about it, the more perplexed she became, until suddenly she froze. Her heart started pounding as she turned and looked back at the cottage.

Yesterday had been identical to today, and she could sense that tomorrow would be the same as well.

An eerie feeling spread through her body as she realized that she was stuck at the beginning of summer. The flower buds were not blooming, and the eggs in the waterfowls' nests remained unhatched. The same was true of the mansion, where everyone was just as busy as ever preparing for Duke Herhardt's return from service on the overseas war front.

She had wanted to live forever in this pleasant time during the early summer of her eighteenth year. Thus, she shouldn't have known the child. After looking back a few more times, she faced him again.

*I need to go home,* she thought. *I've got to hurry up and make dinner, because Kyle is coming over to study for the test with me.*

As she continued to look at the child, however, she started to feel like she recognized him. More precisely, she felt like she recognized who he would be in about twenty years. He looked just like a young version of the man she hated most in the world, while also loving him as much as she hated him.

She hesitantly approached the child, gradually increasing her pace with each step.

Still crying, he started running towards her as well. Opening her arms widely, she took him into her embrace. The forest breeze enveloped them.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself on her

bicycle, riding down the road towards Arvis. She turned the corner and saw the verdant trees of Platanus Road laid out before her. There was a tall man in a Berg officer's uniform sauntering down the road ahead of her.

As the sound of her bicycle's chain mingled with the sound of the breeze shaking the leaves, she brushed past him.

Even though she felt like she shouldn't, she found herself compelled to look back at him. As soon as she did, the two of them made eye contact. The sound of her heart pounding in her chest grew so loud that it drowned out all other sounds. Just then, she lost her balance and fell.

She felt grateful that the wheels of her overturned bicycle were spinning noisily. If it hadn't been for that, the man might have heard her pounding heart.

He approached the spot where she had fallen. She suddenly realized that this had been the start of everything. That beautiful, early-summer day.

She then slowly opened her eyes. Looking down at her round belly, she rubbed it. The baby moved gently in response.

*I'm sorry,* she repeated several times as she sat up in bed. *I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you.*

As she caught her breath and raised her head, her heart was racing, just like on that early-summer day. Her heart always raced when she was with him. She had always assumed this was because he made her frightened and uneasy. Now she realized that there was another reason.

The door opened. “Layla! You're awake!” Kyle shouted, rushing towards her with a bright smile on his face. Sitting down by her bedside, he said, “I'm glad you're up. I've got something to show you.”

She looked blankly at the paper in his hands. It was a document bearing the duke's signature.

# Chapter 139:
## Last Chance

Layla remained silent for a long while. Showing neither joy nor shock, she just calmly read the document, occasionally nodding her head.

“Layla?” Kyle said, suddenly worrying that her condition had worsened again.

Fortunately, this seemed not to be the case.

“What about him?” she calmly asked.

“The duke? He's gone away.”

“Gone away...?”

“Yeah. He went to deliver some news to the crown prince's unit in the rear. He'll be gone for about four days.”

“Four days…?” she replied, parroting his words like a small child just learning to speak.

“In the meantime, we can leave. The duke himself approved this, so no one will stop us.”

“I see...”

“So you've got nothing to worry about, Layla. The duke has put down these promises in writing. That's what the document's for.”

*Promises,* Layla mouthed silently, as she looked again at the document Kyle had brought.

The document laid out the duke's guarantee that he would provide Layla and her child with the means for a comfortable life. It also specified that he was not doing this out of either sympathy or hostility, but simply out of a basic sense of responsibility. There was even a detailed clause stating that he would not intervene in her life any further, unless she so wished.

Furthermore, the document stated that Layla's child would be guaranteed the right to be legally considered the offspring of Duke Matthias von Herhardt, unless Layla would prefer to raise it without his name. Whichever option she preferred, he would respect her

decision completely.

To this end, the document also specified obligations for Layla to fulfill. She and the child were to go to the Berg Empire, which was currently the safest location on the continent. If she wanted to move somewhere else after the war ended, he would respect her decision.

All other matters were left to her free choice. If she went to Ratse, the Herhardt family attorneys would ratify these promises.

Once again she stared at the document for a long while, hardly able to believe the duke had composed it when it contained such improbable words as *choice, respect,* and *free*.

She would need a while longer before she could fully grasp what was happening. She now realized that her conversation with the duke that morning had not been a dream after all.

Noticing the unfocused look in her eyes, Kyle said, “I don't think we need to go right now. How about departing tomorrow?” He didn't want to rush her if she still wasn't fully recovered, but he couldn't help feeling antsy.

He had been completely taken aback by the things the duke had said to him in their conversation. He was letting Layla go. Kyle couldn't believe his ears. He still could barely believe it. Perhaps this was why he wanted to leave so urgently. Better to take care of everything before the duke changed his mind.

The duke had instructed Kyle that he was to help Layla relocate while he was away on his mission. Since her apartment had been destroyed in the air raids, he had prepared another place for her. She could stay there until she had recovered enough to be able to handle long-distance travel, at which point she would leave for Ratse. The duke had entrusted Kyle with the responsibility of supervising her during this process and making sure she remained safe.

Since she hadn't responded to his previous question, he asked, “Are you all right, Layla?”

She looked up at him but said nothing.

“I understand,” he said. “You must be shocked. I was shocked

too. But Layla, this is really happening. There's no need to be hesitant or afraid."

He couldn't get himself to calm down. He had repeatedly told himself not to get too excited, but it was no use. He had gotten Layla back! This thought alone made his heart swell with joy. He felt like he had gone back in time, back to the summer of his nineteenth year, before everything had gone wrong.

Layla set the document down on the bedside table, and then carefully got out of bed. When Kyle rushed over to help her stand, she gently shook her head to refuse his help.

As she tottered across the room, he followed a few steps behind her. Eventually she reached the door, and found that it wasn't locked. She couldn't believe her eyes. Her hands trembled as she reached out and touched the door. The chains and padlock were gone. All that remained were the dents and scratches she had created earlier while trying to escape. After a moment's hesitation, she tried the knob. The door opened easily without resistance.

The focus returned to her eyes as the reality of the moment set in. She was really leaving him. She was free.

* * *

The car lurched to a stop as its wheels sank into another mud pit. This had happened countless times already.

With a look of resignation on his face, the driver said, "I'm sorry, Major."

Matthias nodded to the driver and stepped out of the car.

Excessive rains over the previous two days had made a mess of the dirt roads on which they were traveling. However, the paved roads and bridges that might have served as an alternative route had all been destroyed by Lovitan militia forces, so they had no other choice.

"The sun is about to set. I don't think it will be safe to travel at night," said the lieutenant who had come along on the mission, looking with concern at the reddening western horizon.

“Fine,” Matthias replied. “Our unit's camp is located about an hour from here, so let's sleep there tonight.”

“Yes, Major, I'll let the other men know,” the lieutenant replied, looking relieved. He then ran towards the two soldiers who had just managed to push the car out of the mud and informed them of the change of plans.

Matthias checked his watch and then lit a cigarette. Even if he wasn't going to be able to be with Layla anymore, he didn't want to waste time in this matter. And yet here they were. A bitter smile appeared on his face as he realized how nervous he was. *She still has this effect on me,* he thought. *Maybe she always will. Perhaps I'd better send her off earlier than planned.*

The front was stable where they were. Even if guerilla forces caused trouble for them, the stability of the troops and supply lines in the rear meant that they should have no problem advancing. However, the crown prince had expressed concern over the unusual quietness of the Southern Alliance forces. Matthias felt the same.

The Southern Alliance had fought back during the early stages of the offensive, but now they were allowing Berg to take key strategic points with a suspicious level of passivity. This could be a sign that Berg and its allies had achieved an overwhelming victory, but it could also be a sign of an intentional, strategic retreat by the Southern Alliance.

What if, now that Berg had advanced deep into Lovita, troops from other Southern Alliance nations were planning to enter Lovita and block off Berg's retreat and supply routes?

The crown prince had expressed his concern about this worst-case scenario as well. Of course, General von Delman was certain that none of the countries in the Southern Alliance had any troops left to provide support, and so he would likely insist on continuing with the advance.

The key to the whole matter was held by the overseas kingdom of Ettarre. It was Lovita's most trusted ally, but it had been reluctant to join the war, making no commitment even after several months.

It would be nice for Berg if Ettarre continued to betray Lovita like this, but one could never be too sure, as Lovita would likely put a great deal of pressure on their ally to join the fight. If they did end up joining and launched a counterattack against Berg, Sienne would turn into the fiercest battlefield of the war. He needed to get Layla to Berg before that happened.

“We're ready to go, Major,” the soldiers shouted.

Matthias threw his cigarette to the ground and started walking back to the car. Suddenly, then, he stopped in his tracks, and started looking around with narrowed eyes.

“Major, is something wr-”

Matthias raised his hand to stop the soldiers from approaching him. His other hand was already on his holster. Sensing the strange atmosphere, the other men hurried to prepare for battle. Just then, militia forces that had been hiding in the forest launched a surprise attack.

Gunshots rang out over the quiet country road.

* * *

After four days, the duke still hadn't returned.

Layla stood in front of the window, gazing outside. Suddenly, she sensed someone standing behind her. Startled, she turned around. It was Kyle.

“Are you done packing?” he asked, smiling cheerfully. He had decided not to overanalyze the fact that she had been spending every spare moment since the duke had left staring pensively out the window. “Let's go, Layla. I know it's probably still uncomfortable for you to move around, but the place where you'll be staying isn't far from here, so-”

“Kyle...”

“Is that your only bag?” Pretending not to hear her, he calmly lifted her bag from the foot of the bed.

“Kyle, I-”

“You have to leave him, Layla.” He looked into her eyes, no

longer smiling.

For the past few days, he had been entertaining a joyful fantasy. The war would suddenly end, and he and Layla would go to Ratse together. Once there, they would get married, and then they could raise the beautiful family that Layla had always wanted. He would gladly accept her first child as his own. Later on, they would have children together as well. In this way, they would live happily ever after...

“I'm not asking you to be with me again. I know you can't do that, Layla.”

The fact that this fantasy could never be a reality only made it more beautiful to him, like a wonderful fairytale. His eyes grew solemn as he let go of that empty dream.

When she had called out to him in the middle of her fever dreams, he had known that it wasn't because she had lingering feelings of love for him. He had known at once that she longed for him not as a lover, but as a friend, and as a surrogate brother.

It was their childhood together at Arvis that she missed.

As much as he wanted to believe in the sweet fantasy he had constructed for their future, he had spent far too much time with Layla, and knew her far too well, to think it was possible. He knew that she would never be able to be with him when she had another man's child. No matter how willing he was to accept the child as his own, she would never accept him as its father.

However, even if they could never be lovers, Layla was still his dear friend. He couldn't stand the thought of her living a life of despair.

“All I want is for you to be happy,” he said. “And that man will never be able to make you or your child happy. Think about it, Layla. Think about what the duke has done to you. Your judgment is compromised right now because he's been tormenting you.” He was speaking quite forcefully.

She looked down at her feet. She knew that he was right. The duke had relentlessly tormented her, leaving emotional scars that

would never heal, all for the sake of his twisted lust and obsession over her. He didn't love her. He wasn't capable of love.

Kyle walked up to her and, taking her by the hand, slowly but firmly walked towards the door of the room. As she allowed him to lead her, she felt like she was walking on clouds. He opened the door and they stepped out into the hallway, only to find Marquess Lindman there, leaning casually against the wall.

“Are you really thinking of leaving, Miss Llewellyn?” he asked.

His question made her wince.

“Duke Herhardt has granted permission for her to go. This has nothing to do with you, Marquess,” Kyle said, moving himself in between Riette and Layla.

Riette looked at Kyle with narrowed eyes. “Nothing to do with me? I could say the same about you, Mr. Ettman.”

“Step aside, please.”

“I'm not trying to defend Matthias, Miss Llewellyn. He's wildly capricious. I'm sure you're quite fed up with him. Trust me, I understand how you feel. But...” Riette let out a deep sigh, putting his hand to his forehead.

With clear eyes, Layla looked over Kyle's shoulder at him.

“But Miss Llewellyn, still... he's come all this way.”

“Marquess!” Kyle grumbled.

“He canceled his wedding and volunteered for a dangerous assignment in the war, all so that he could come here to find you.” Riette clutched his hair as if he was going to rip it out.

Layla's eyes grew focused as she looked at him. She looked very perplexed by what she was hearing. “What... are you talking about?” she asked.

“You didn't know? The distinguished Duke Herhardt broke off his engagement, casting his fiancée aside. And despite everyone's warnings and attempts to stop him, he volunteered to command a unit with an extremely dangerous mission, all so that he could come here to Sienne. You really weren't aware of this?”

Riette now looked as perplexed as Layla. He couldn't understand

why the duke would have thrown everything away in pursuit of this woman, without telling her that he had done so.

“Layla and Duke Herhardt no longer have anything to do with each other,” Kyle said in a cold tone. “Don't be swayed, Layla. The fact that the duke didn't get married doesn't change anything. He's still the same Matthias von Herhardt as ever.”

“Kyle...”

“If this is about the baby, that's all the more reason for you to escape the duke. He could never be a good father.”

At the mention of the baby, Layla's trembling eyes became still. She looked down at her round belly. She knew that the duke's feelings for her and the baby were anything but normal. Perhaps he was aware of this too, and that was why he had arranged to have her sent away like this.

“Miss Llewellyn?” Riette said in a pleading tone as he tried to approach her.

Kyle remained standing steadfastly between them, and said, “This miraculous opportunity is your last chance.” He lowered his head and looked at Layla.

“Let's go, Layla.”

# Chapter 140:
## That Was All

The team that had gone to deliver the message to the crown prince returned a day later than scheduled, in the late afternoon. At the staff meeting that followed their return, Matthias gave a report in which he described the situation in the rear and relayed the crown prince's thoughts on the ongoing strategy.

He also reported that one of the soldiers, who had been severely injured in the shootout with the militia, had been escorted from the garrison directly to the military hospital in the rear, and that another soldier, whose injuries were comparatively light, had simply had his wounds dressed before returning to Sienne.

It was only after the staff meeting had concluded that the identity of the latter soldier was revealed to be Matthias von Herhardt himself. Despite his immaculate appearance, he went straight from the meeting to the military hospital.

When Riette heard about this, he rushed to the hospital, and found that Matthias's treatment had already been completed.

“I hear you got injured. Are you all right?” Riette asked, looking with amazement at Matthias, who looked completely fine. He started to wonder if the news of Matthias's injury had been false.

Meanwhile, Matthias brushed past him, saying nothing. A faint smell of disinfectant wafted off of him.

“Where are you hurt?” Riette asked. “What happened? And what's going on with Layla Llewellyn? Huh? Say something. Come on.”

Matthias said very little in response to Riette's persistent questioning, and then got up to leave. His face, posture, and demeanor looked just like the Duke Herhardt that Riette had always known.

“Did you lose your hearing or something? Come on, speak to me,” Riette said, following stubbornly behind him.

Soon they were ascending the stairs of the hotel. Riette couldn't understand Matthias's behavior at all. After throwing away his whole life because of his wild desire for Layla Llewellyn, who was carrying his own child, he had given her up to the doctor's son.

Riette grew more and more irritated at the way his cousin was ignoring him, until they arrived at the door of Room 308. Matthias stared sullenly at the closed door.

Noticing the sudden shift in his cousin's demeanor, Riette couldn't bring himself to keep pestering him. There was a subtle mixture of resignation and anticipation on Matthias's face. Most people wouldn't have noticed this, but Riette knew his cousin well enough to sense it. *You bastard,* he thought about saying, before changing his mind and shutting his mouth.

Meanwhile, Matthias reached out and turned the doorknob. The door slowly opened to reveal the room full of afternoon sunlight. Everything was neatly arranged. No trace could be seen of the woman who had been imprisoned there.

Matthias stood there for a while with his hand on the doorknob, slowly surveying the room with a calm gaze. A slight grin appeared on his lips, making him look as serene as the afternoon sunlight.

He had let her go, and she had left. He calmly accepted this simple fact. The wild obsession that had been raging within him ever since he had lost Layla in the spring was gone.

It was a lonely, empty feeling, but he could endure it. He didn't have the urge to escape or deny it. He knew he had to get used to it. After all, this was what his life was going to be like from now on.

He quietly stepped over the threshold and entered the room.

Following close behind him, Riette asked, “Did you really do all those wild things for this? You hurt and humiliated Claudine, and then traveled into this warzone to capture and torment Layla, just for things to end up like this?”

Paying no mind to his cousin's heated questions, Matthias casually removed his cap and overcoat.

“If this is what you wanted, you could've just...” Riette trailed off,

forgetting the things he was about to shout. He stared in shocked silence at his cousin.

Matthias had taken off his uniform jacket, revealing a shirt completely soaked in blood. Riette couldn't believe his eyes. His cousin appeared to be severely injured, and yet not a hair on his head was out of place. It was a chilling sight.

While Riette stood at a loss for words, Matthias removed his blood-soaked shirt. The gauze wrapped around his waist was wet with blood.

“Did you get shot?” Riette asked.

“Just got nicked by a bullet or two,” Matthias flatly replied before lying down on the bed.

Muttering obscenities under his breath, Riette walked over to him. “With injuries this bad, don't you think you should've stayed at the hospital?”

“We're in a warzone.”

“So what? You think that means that bullets can't kill you?” Riette shouted, unable to control his emotions even though he knew that it would have been impossible during wartime to hospitalize a patient with wounds this severe or transfer him to the rear.

Leaning against the cushioned headboard, Matthias gazed calmly at his cousin.

“You wild bastard,” Riette grumbled.

Matthias reacted with an amused grin. Despite his relaxed expression, however, he looked exhausted.

“I'd like to get some rest, Riette,” he said in a hoarse voice, blinking slowly.

Riette could understand his fatigue. After all, he had sent his woman away with another man, and was now pretending that nothing was wrong.

“You wild, wild bastard,” Riette repeated. These were the only words he could find at the moment.

Matthias snickered, and then raised his arm over his face to block the sunlight.

Riette departed, leaving the room in perfect silence. Matthias closed his eyes, and was transported in his mind back to the last night he and Layla had spent together.

After tossing and turning for a bit, she woke up and whispered, *"I'm hot."*

Having assumed that she was going to be looking for Bill Remmer or Kyle Ettman again, Matthias was taken aback by what she said.

*"I'm hot,"* she repeated. *"It's stuffy in here."* She threw the covers off her body like a cranky child.

He stopped her from getting out of bed, and then went to the bathroom and returned with a washcloth soaked in cold water. To avoid lowering her temperature too much, he carefully dabbed the cloth along the edge of her forehead.

Once he finished, she turned to him and grumbled, *"I want to go outside."* Her eyes looked dazed, as if she was still half-asleep.

Sitting in a chair next to the bed, he pulled the covers back up over her body.

*"It's stuffy in here. I want to get some fresh air."*

*"Not right now,"* he whispered in a soothing tone as he brushed the hair away from her forehead.

*"Why not?"* she mouthed.

*"It's cold and dark outside, Layla."*

*"I don't care. I want to go outside. I'm going to do what I want,"* she mumbled, her eyes half-closed. *"I'm going to do it because I know you don't want me to. I'll do whatever I can to torment you."*

*"Layla..."*

*"I hate you, so I'm going to try to get on your nerves."*

He gazed at her calmly as she continued to toss mild threats at him in her half-asleep state. Soon he let out a peaceful chuckle. He almost felt like they were back in the days when he had believed that she loved him.

*"Go ahead, torment me,"* he replied.

Her eyes grew hazier at this response.

*"Do your worst,"* he added.

*“Really?”*

*“Really.”*

*“All right, I will,”* she said. However, her eyes were almost completely closed. She muttered a few more unintelligible words, and then fell into a deep sleep.

He continued gazing at her all night, until a warm ray of morning sunlight peeked through the window. Then he carefully lifted her out of bed and carried her with him to the chair by the window side. He opened one of the windows a crack, and a pleasant sea breeze blew in.

Holding her in his arms with the sunlight and the breeze gently washing over them, he leaned back in the chair and slowly shut his eyes.

He knew that the moment she woke up, this lovely, playful side of her would be gone, and she would once again look at him with hatred and contempt. That was how she really felt about him, and it would never change.

He lowered his head towards her sleeping face and gently kissed her brow. He felt like he was back in the days when she had pretended to love him.

He wanted time to stop. That way, he could keep this sweet, intimate time as his last memory with her. If he could do that, he would be satisfied. That would be enough for him.

When he lowered his arm from his face, the mellow evening sunlight was shining at a low angle. He gazed at the rose-tinted sky with a peaceful look on his face.

He had let her go, and she had left. And now, only he remained. That was all.

* * *

The soldier who had cleared everything out of Layla's apartment handed her a small gift-wrapped box, saying, “This seemed important.” When he saw the confused look on her face, he added, “It was in the box in the kitchen. The box next to the bundle of

foodstuffs and necessities, I mean."

"Oh...!" Her eyes widened as she realized that the soldier was referring to the box of Uncle Bill's belongings, which she had never been able to bring herself to open. She thanked the soldier and accepted the giftbox.

After moving the rest of her luggage into the house, the soldier left, and Layla was alone once again. Holding the box, which was topped with a colorful bow, she sat down in a chair by the window.

The place where the duke had arranged for her to stay was a small wooden house on a road near the coast. It seemed that the family who lived there had fled in quite a hurry, because most of the furniture was still there. This made her feel a little strange, so she decided to stay in the guest bedroom. She wanted to leave the house more or less undisturbed when she left.

*I'm leaving...*

It was only then that it dawned on her that she was really leaving. She slowly gripped the loose ends of the bow.

Matthias had returned to Sienne a day later than scheduled. This was all that Kyle had told her about him, and she had asked no follow-up questions. Everything was over with him now. It was hard to believe, but it was true. The fact that he had called off his wedding meant nothing.

As she gazed out the window at the peaceful scenery outside, she thought about all the time she had spent while being held captive by the duke, when she had prayed endlessly that she could be free from him. The feelings she had felt then—the intense sadness, pain, and hatred—were all gone now. It was all over. It felt oddly anticlimactic.

She kept staring at the empty road outside until it started to get dark, and she remembered that a nurse was going to be stopping by soon. Impulsively, she pulled the ends of the bow, untying it, and opened the box with quivering hands. Inside, she found a pair of baby shoes.

*So he knew... Uncle Bill knew all along.*

She started laughing and crying at once. She thought back to the day Bill had petted her hair and said, *"I have something to tell you, so I'll wait until our party tonight."*

Now she knew what he had been talking about. He must have been planning to give her the present and congratulate her on the baby.

Just as he had found it in his heart to love the little orphan girl who had shown up with the mail one day, he had loved her child as well.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and stood up. She placed the white shoes neatly back in their box and put the box into her suitcase.

Suddenly, the feeling of emptiness in her heart went away, and she felt a renewed sense of purpose. *I'm going to live a long, happy life. I promised Uncle Bill that I could do anything if he believed in me. Well, now it's time for me to believe in him. He wouldn't want to see his daughter sitting by helplessly. I'm going to become an outstanding adult for him!*

"Let's go, Baby," she said to her belly, inside of which she could feel the baby moving.

She was sure that the duke was going to keep the promise he had made her. That was the kind of person he was. He was cruel and detestable, but he always kept his promises.

Thus, as much as she hated him, she also trusted him.

His feelings for her were anything but ordinary, and now she realized that the same was true of her feelings for him. That was the kind of person they both were.

Looking out the window again, she saw that the sun had started to set. She pulled the curtains shut.

* * *

Matthias stood at the corner of the street near the house where Layla was staying. He came this way every single day, but never approached closer than this to the house. As much as he longed to

see her, he knew that he mustn't. Otherwise, he would never be able to let her go.

And yet, he still found himself returning to this spot, day after day. He didn't want to leave. *I guess my feelings for her still haven't subsided. Perhaps they never will. But it will be all right. As long as she can live a good life, it will be all right. As long as I can catch the occasional glimpse of her from a distance.*

He knew that he had to live a good life as well. After all, she might hear news about him now and then. He didn't want her to hear that he was a broken man, even though that was how he felt whenever he saw her.

She was his first love, and would be his last love as well. Even if he was only a shell of a man, he intended to live as good of a life as he could. As long as Layla was living somewhere out there, he had to. However, he didn't think he would ever love or desire anyone else.

He wasn't bitter about this, though. If it hadn't been for Layla, he might never have been able to experience true love. Even though he had lost her, he still had his memories of her. Those memories alone would give him the strength to go on living.

Hoping that the scar she had left in his heart would never heal, he finally turned away from the house. The tails of his overcoat flapped in the breeze as he slowly walked away.

When he visited the spot each day, he always showed up immaculately dressed, even though he knew he was going to leave without seeing her. After all, she might catch a glimpse of him through the window. Even if she was going to keep hating him forever, he wanted to look nice for her.

As he chuckled at himself for his petty vanity, he arrived at the square. Immediately, he sensed that there had been a sudden shift in the mood of the Berg soldiers. No longer enjoying a leisurely vacation, the men were moving swiftly and anxiously.

Furrowing his brow, he stepped into the hotel lobby. His aide spotted him and came running towards him. “Major! The Ettarre

army has joined Sienne's landing operation. An emergency meeting has been called, and all commanding officers have been ordered to attend!”

# Chapter 141:
## I'm Here

A lockdown order was issued as the soldiers in Sienne once again prepared for battle. All civilian travel passes were suspended, making it impossible for residents to leave the city.

Kyle paced in front of the Berg military headquarters with a worried expression on his face. The sudden shift in the tides of the war had spoiled the plan to send Layla off.

After causing trouble for its allies in the Southern Alliance by staying out of the fray, Ettarre had finally decided to join the war. By intercepting communications, Berg had determined that the Ettarre army intended to land in Sienne. With indications that other members of the Southern Alliance would also be joining the fight, it appeared that the Alliance was planning a large-scale attempt at recapturing their lost territory.

Kyle's face grew more anxious as he checked his watch. There wasn't enough time to wait for Layla to recover from her illness, or to wade through all the red tape to get her out of Sienne legally. There was no official word from headquarters yet, but he could tell from the fact that the soldiers were preparing for battle that the enemy army would be arriving very soon.

Sienne would turn back into a dangerous battlefield in no time. He thus had to get Layla out of the city right away. But how could he manage that when there was a lockdown order? A feeling of panic started to course through his veins.

Just then, the officers whose emergency meeting had just ended started emerging from the headquarters. Kyle spotted Matthias at once. Matthias was looking right back at him. The two men nodded to each other, and then headed together to the rear of the headquarters building.

“What's the status of her travel pass?” Kyle asked. He knew it had almost certainly been canceled like all other civilian passes, but he

was holding on to the last thread of hope.

Matthias said nothing, confirming the sad truth that the pass had been canceled.

“Then Layla won't be able to-”

“Layla will leave Sienne right away,” Matthias affirmed in a confident tone.

“But aren't civilians barred from travel?”

“Kyle, do you know how to drive?”

“What? Uh... Yeah, I know how to drive. Why do you ask...?” Kyle looked quizzically at Matthias.

Matthias, meanwhile, was looking across the square, where several ambulances were rushing to and fro. All severely injured patients at the field hospital were being transported to the hospital in the rear before the enemies landed.

“What are you planning?” Kyle asked, his voice shaking nervously.

Matthias's eyes remained utterly calm as he slowly shifted his gaze to face Kyle again.

Whatever he was planning, he had clearly made up his mind already.

* * *

Layla checked her suitcase once more before closing it. Then she put on her shoes and buttoned up her coat. All that was left for her to do was head to the spot where Kyle had told her to meet him. There were still a few hours until they were supposed to meet, but she had finished getting ready early.

Because of the sudden shift in the war, she was now going to depart from Sienne in a way she never would have expected. Kyle told her that he had been assigned to drive an ambulance carrying patients from the Sienne field hospital to the hospital at the rear line. Their plan was to have Layla hide in the ambulance so that she could evade the lockdown order and flee the city. Marquess Lindman would be coming along as well, since he had to return to

his unit in the rear.

Kyle had not once mentioned Matthias's name, but she had no doubt that the whole plan was his idea.

*I'm leaving,* she repeated over and over again in her mind. *I'm leaving this city. I'm leaving behind that man and all the time I spent under his control. Now I can forget all that and start a new life with my baby. A new life without the slightest trace of the duke in it. That's what's best for me, for the baby, and for the duke.*

Suddenly the silence inside the house became difficult to bear, and she opened the curtains a crack. A sliver of moonlight seeped into the room.

While Kyle drove the ambulance to the meeting spot, Marquess Lindman was going to come to the house, and the two of them would walk together to meet up with Kyle. It was a simple plan, and she was sure it would go off without a hitch.

She would never see Matthias again. At this thought, she felt the baby move inside her. It seemed that the baby still loved its father. This made her sad.

* * *

The plan had to remain an absolute secret. All three men understood this without anyone having to state it explicitly. They were planning to violate a direct order from their commander during wartime. This was a serious crime. If they were caught, even a high-ranking aristocrat like Duke Herhardt would not be able to escape punishment.

*So why am I voluntarily helping out with this wild scheme that will get me court-martialed if something goes wrong?* Riette wondered, rubbing his face.

Sitting across from him, Matthias was gazing out the window into the darkness, looking incredibly calm for the risky plan in which he was taking part. After a moment, sensing his cousin's uneasiness, he looked at Riette's reflection in the windowpane and said, “You don't have to help if you don't want to.”

“Why shouldn't I help? All I'm doing is hitching a ride in an ambulance so I can return to my unit. Right?” Riette slyly replied. He had understood what he was getting into the moment he agreed to assist with the plan. He had no intention of backing out now.

His job was to escort Layla to the ambulance, and then ride in it to the rear line. On the surface, it would look like an officer hurrying back to his unit due to the emergency situation. No more, no less. There was nothing unusual about an aristocratic officer using a military vehicle in this way, so it was unlikely to arouse any suspicion. As long as Layla remained hidden, that is.

“I'm just repaying a debt,” Riette added. “It has nothing to do with you, Your Grace.”

“A debt?” Matthias replied, narrowing his eyes.

Riette turned and looked his cousin in the eye. “Yes. I feel sorry for the mean tricks I played on Miss Llewellyn. I also plan to do something for which I will feel sorry toward you.”

“You must be planning to propose to Claudine, now that my engagement to her is officially called off. Is that right?” Matthias asked, remaining utterly calm.

“You... knew?” Riette asked, taken aback.

Matthias just snickered and checked his watch.

“How long have you known?” Riette asked.

“I don't know. Hard to say for sure,” Matthias replied.

He had been aware of Claudine and Riette's mutual attraction for a very long time. There wasn't any particular incident that had given them away. He had just been able to sense it. He had known both of them since childhood, after all. He chuckled to himself as he realized that Claudine had likely been aware of his attraction to Layla for quite a long time as well.

“Did you know about us when you proposed to Claudine?”

“I did.”

“And that didn't make you reconsider the engagement?”

“I think you misunderstand the reasons why Claudine and I got engaged in the first place.” Matthias was speaking in a flat tone, not

trying to hide anything.

Riette slumped back in his chair, letting out a weak sigh. “Yes, you were certainly successful. Successful to a fault,” he gently chided.

For Matthias, marriage was purely a public affair. He had gone to a prestigious school and taken charge of the family business as a way of maintaining his family's prestige. His choice of bride was no different. Claudine thought of him the same way. In a sense, the two truly were a match made in heaven.

Even if there were aspects of his cousin's personality that Riette didn't understand, there was one thing of which he was absolutely sure: Matthias loved Layla. This was why he was letting her go. Precisely because he loved her.

“I've changed my mind. I won't feel sorry toward you anymore,” Riette said, shaking his head.

“Suit yourself,” Matthias replied. He then checked his watch again, signaling the end of the conversation.

The look on Riette's face shifted from exasperation to mild pity. “If this is how things were going to end up, I would've rather—”

Riette's sentence was cut off by a loud explosion. Matthias reflexively sprung to his feet and ran to the window to open the curtain. Meanwhile, an even closer explosion shook the entire building.

“It's an air raid! An enemy air raid!”

The air-raid siren started ringing, along with an amplified voice ordering everyone to take cover. The quiet hotel transformed into a noisy pandemonium in an instant. The departure time for the ambulance that Kyle Ettman would be driving was about an hour away.

“Damn it! Matthias!”

“Go to Ettman!” Matthias shouted. “Tell him she'll be at the meeting place as soon as possible. She won't be late!”

“Huh? What about you? Don't tell me you're going to meet Layla, are you?” Riette asked.

Matthias turned away without answering, and proceeded to leave the hotel room without a moment's hesitation.

“Matthias!”

Riette's shout was drowned out by the noise of the bombs and the siren.

Without looking back, Matthias ran off into the dark city, as bombs continued to rain down.

* * *

Dropping her suitcase, Layla pressed her hands to her ears, but the noise of the bombs was still unbearably loud. She crawled under a small table in the bedroom.

*You've got to get to the basement,* she told herself. However, the combination of fear and her lingering illness made it hard to move.

The bombs sounded terrifyingly close. There were earth-shaking booms in all directions, along with the sound of windows shattering. Something bright outside the bedroom window caught her eye. She looked and saw that the house across the street was engulfed in flames.

“It's all right, baby,” she muttered repeatedly, wrapping her arms around her belly. She was trying to calm down both her baby and herself, but it wasn't working on either of them.

Air full of smoke and dust started to waft in through the broken windows. She grew more and more frightened as the bombs seemed to be getting closer.

*Calm down. Please.* She tried to hold on to her composure even as her whole body began to tremble with fear. *The clock!* She looked in the direction of the table clock, which she had been checking obsessively before the air raid began. Unfortunately, it had fallen to the floor and broken.

*There can't be more than an hour left until the meeting time. With this air raid going on, will Marquess Lindman be able to make it here? If not, I'll have to go to the meeting place alone. Should I wait for Marquess Lindman? But what if he can't make it?*

As she tried to decide what to do, another bomb shook the house's foundation. At that moment, Matthias's face flashed into her mind. Suddenly, she felt certain that he was going to come find her. After all, he always had in the past. Whether she liked it or not, he had always found his way back to her side, just like the birds. He had traveled to an enemy country and made it across a dangerous battlefield just to find her, so he would surely find her this time as well.

Amid the noise of the bombs, she felt like she could hear him saying, *"Hello, Layla."*

Imagining him made her feel desperate and afraid, and yet at the same time, lurking behind those feelings was another feeling that was hard to identify.

Her feelings towards him were like two sides of a coin. This had been true since she had first encountered him.

That frightening and yet handsome young man had been pointing a gun at her the first time she had laid eyes on him. Soon after that, he had stepped on her gold coin. After that, she never wanted to see him again, and yet she had kept running into him. Each time, he had made her feel a little worse.

Holding back her tears, she crawled out from under the table and lifted her suitcase. She knew exactly where she was supposed to meet Kyle. The problem was making it there safely while the air raid was going on.

*Don't cry,* she told herself as she staggered to her feet. Holding on to the walls and furniture for support, she started moving towards the door. However, her vision seemed to be growing blurrier with each step.

Suddenly her mind flashed back to the night she had cried while holding in her mouth the piece of candy the duke had given her. It was the first time she had been able to cry to her heart's content. As much as she hated him, she had felt very safe and cozy in his warm arms as he had clumsily tried to comfort her. She hadn't been able to believe that she was feeling so comfortable. The shame of this

realization had made her cry even harder. He had patiently continued holding her as she cried and cried. She could still vividly remember the soft texture of his sweater against her cheek, and the sweet taste of the candy as it melted away to nothing on her tongue.

After her sobbing had subsided, she had looked up, and he had slowly, gently wiped the tears from her face. At that moment, all she could do was stare at him. She had been reminded of the last piece of blue candy that she had saved from the jar her mother had given her, and how she had cried so much as a little girl while finally eating it. As she lay in Matthias's arms while he wiped away her tears, she felt like that little girl's tears were finally being wiped away as well. Instead of tasting salty with blood, the candy was only sweet this time. Just as she realized this, the duke had started smiling faintly.

*That's strange,* she had thought. *No one likes a crying orphan. That's why I always try to smile for everyone. I've practiced smiling so much, I have the brightest smile in the world.*

Not wanting to confront the strange feelings rising within her, she had turned away from him. He had then let her go, no longer trying to threaten her.

As she had then hurriedly left the cabin, that strange moment had stuck in her memory. After entering the forest, where the thick foliage blocked the moonlight, she had involuntarily looked back.

The path back to the cottage had felt incredibly long that night. As she walked along it, she had looked back several more times. Each time, her shadow had seemed a little larger.

*No. I feel so ashamed. I hate him. That's why I cut off that long shadow.*

And yet the shadow had kept growing and growing. Perhaps she was still walking on that same road, with her shadow still growing larger.

She opened her tightly shut eyes and reached for the knob of the bedroom door. However, before she could open it, there was

another loud boom, and she crouched down in fright.

It was then that she heard a voice calling her name: “Layla!”

Even amid the deafening noise of the bombs, she recognized the voice at once. It was Matthias. His voice sounded much too clear to be her imagination, and it was getting closer.

“I'm here... I'm in here!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “I'm in here! In here!” she continued to shout, as tears poured out of her eyes.

Just then, the door opened. Tears were blurring her vision, but she could see the man in front of her clearly. Sure enough, it was Matthias.

# Chapter 142:
## Promise

They didn't have much time to gaze into each other's eyes. Layla soon started to stumble, and Matthias caught her. Lifting her up, he then hurried to the basement door. Still holding her, he flung the door open and slid down the ladder. Just as they reached the basement floor, another bomb landed nearby, shaking the earth anc separating the two of them from each other.

There were no lights on in the basement, so it was pitch black, but he found her again in an instant. She was leaning against the wall, quivering as she struggled to catch her breath.

Realizing that she was standing near a precarious shelf full of foodstuffs, he picked her up again and moved her far away from it.

“It's all right,” he said.

The sound of his gentle voice brought her to her senses. She looked in his direction.

“Everything will be all right very soon,” he whispered, a little more quietly this time.

Even in the dark, she could recognize his eyes. Those eyes, as still as a deep pool, had inspired fear and hatred in her heart so many times, while other times they had filled her with anticipation.

Gazing into those eyes, she nodded several times, like a well-behaved child. Holding her in his arms, he sat down on a wooden box in a corner of the basement.

There was probably a lamp somewhere, but it wasn't worth trying to find it right now. Thus the two of them remained sitting in the thick darkness, feeling one another's breath and body heat as they endured the continuing bombardment. As time passed, their eyes slowly adjusted to the dark.

Without meaning to, she started reaching out to touch his face. As soon as she realized what she was doing, she hurriedly pulled her hand back. She couldn't see him very well, but he appeared to

be uncharacteristically unkempt. His body felt warm, and his heart was beating strongly.

He had come and found her. As this fact sank in for her, she was finally able to breathe freely. He had passed through a rain of bombs to find her. This made her feel a combination of relief, sadness, and a third emotion that she couldn't identify. Soon, the mixed feelings turned into tears that started flowing from her eyes.

Now that she thought about it, she realized that the whole time she had been staying in this house, she had been waiting for him to come. She had willingly left him, and she had had no reason to believe he would come, and yet she had been waiting for him, like a fool.

Instead of putting her hand to his face, she grabbed his arm, which was still scarred from the gunshot wound.

“Just wait a little longer, Layla. It's still too dangerous to go outside now,” he said, glancing at her for a moment before looking out into the darkness again. “Once the bombing stops, I'll take you to where Ettman is waiting.” He hugged her trembling body more tightly.

It took her a moment to understand why he had said what he said. When she grabbed his arm, he had thought that she was rejecting him, that she was trying to push him away, like she had always done in the past. She tried to show him this wasn't the case by shaking her head, but it didn't seem like he noticed. She tried to ask if he was all right, but no voice came out. Gazing up at the side of his face as he continued to look away from her, she silently cried. The world was still collapsing outside, but in that moment all she could hear was his heart beating.

She started to reflect on who he was to her. He was a cruel man who had brutally tormented her, leaving indelible wounds in her heart. He had ruined her life without remorse. She hated him more than anyone else in the world. That was why she could never forgive him. That was why she had to live the rest of her life without ever seeing him again. It was all perfectly clear.

However, even when he was treating her mostly cruelly, he never quite went all the way. There was always a hint of softness in his eye, gentleness in his touch. Her memories of him were thus imbued with a certain degree of fondness. She had tried to ignore this, but it was no use. The feeling remained.

It was almost like... love.

The thought was absurd, and yet she couldn't help thinking it. It really did seem like love. It was a strange, twisted, perhaps unhealthy form of love, which she had traveled a great distance to try to escape. And yet, for all that, it was still love. He loved her, and she loved him. This had been true through all their time together.

*Look at me,* she wanted to say, but she still couldn't make a sound. Instead, she put her hand to his cheek.

He looked down at her, seeming a little confused. Their eyes met momentarily, and then he looked away again.

Even while he continued to hold her snugly in his arms, he didn't want to look at her. As she tried to attract his eyes once again, it occurred to her how much he had always gazed at her. She then realized that the time she had spent in his gaze had not merely been full of pain and tears.

Shaking her head to stop her tears, she put her hand to his cheek again and made him face her, just as he had done so many times to her.

They spoke at the same time.

“Layla…”

“The baby…”

The sound of explosions continued to ring out upstairs.

“The baby... Our baby... It needs a name. I want you to name it.” Her hand started trembling slightly as she caressed his cheek.

He stared blankly at her, as if he hadn't understood her words.

“I'm going to wait for you... Our baby and I will be waiting for you, so I want you to name it. Right now.”

She now understood that there had never really been a last

chance. Perhaps it was a foolish choice. Perhaps her love for him was abnormal. But if she was acting unwisely, she didn't want to be wise. Even if her love was flawed, it was her love. She loved him. She loved being with him.

"It's all right. We're going to be all right," she said. She wanted to smile for him, but tears kept wetting her lips. "The baby loves you. Really. Since I love you, the baby does too, so-"

"Layla?"

"I love you." Once she revealed this secret that she had been keeping both from him and from herself, it was like the floodgates of her feelings had been opened. "I love you. I don't like you, in fact I hate you, but even so, I love you." Crying like a little girl, she kept whispering, *I love you. I really love you.*

Each time she said it, his eyes shook slightly in response.

"If I hear you say that lie one more time, Layla... I'm really going to kill you. I'll kill you and then myself, so please-"

"No. It's not a lie," she said, shaking her head urgently. "It was never a lie. Even when I said it before, when I thought I was fooling you, I was just fooling myself. It was the truth. I hated you more than I could bear. And yet, as much as I hated you, I loved you an equal amount. I still do."

At some point in the past, he had become her everything. She disliked him, feared him, hated him. He made her suffer. He made her sad. She had wanted to be rid of him. She had wanted to escape him. Sometimes she had even wanted to die because of him. And yet, in the end...

"Layla, if you keep saying this, you'll never be free of me," he said, snickering as he winced with pain at the emotions he was feeling. Even as he winced, he looked very handsome.

She gazed at him with a gentle look in her eyes. She finally felt like she could start putting the pieces of her broken heart back together.

It was love. Perhaps she had already known this. Perhaps she had realized it deep down inside of her, on that beautiful afternoon

when she had stood on the Sienne beach, when he had finally made it through hell to find her.

She continued to caress his face, feeling his forehead, nose, and lips with the tips of her fingers. Then she put her hand to his cheek again and smiled. “Don't discard me,” she whispered. “Return to me. If you do, I'll forgive you for everything. I won't hate you anymore. Then we can have a fresh start together.”

She felt a quickening heartbeat. She couldn't tell if it was his or her own, and she didn't care.

“We can have a fresh start without hatred or sadness, with nothing but love,” she said. “I'm confident I can do this, and I know the baby can too. Can you?”

Her tears started flowing again. *If he can't do it, what will I do?*

As her heart was filling with fear and trepidation over this thought, another bomb struck nearby, shaking everything around them. However, she could barely hear it.

They sat with their foreheads touching. They could feel the warmth of one another's breath. Soon, he put his lips to hers. They kissed each other passionately. She hugged him tightly and clutched at his soft hair. In that moment, it was like he was the only thing that existed in her world.

After a while, they stopped for a moment. Struggling to catch her breath, she said, “Promise me. I want you to promise that you'll return to me. Soon.”

“Fine,” he said as he kissed her on the temple. “I will.”

As tears continued to flow down her cheeks, she smiled. “I trust you to keep your promise. No matter what anyone says, I'll always trust you. So you'd better not be lying, all right?”

“I promise, Layla.” Hugging her tightly, he nodded. “I'll return to you.” Seeing the innocent, unconditional trust in her eyes, he slowly smiled. “I'll return to you. I promise.”

* * *

The air raid stopped just as the sun was starting to rise. Matthias

ran through the ruined city, holding Layla in his arms. The meeting time had already passed. Even if Kyle and Riette stalled, they wouldn't be able to delay leaving much longer.

Now that the bomber planes had left, the sky was filled with the faint light of dawn, along with a lot of smoke and some flocks of birds moving uneasily here and there.

Matthias was breathing heavily, but he didn't stop or slow down. He needed to get Layla safely out of the city. This singular objective compelled him to keep moving.

The spot where Kyle would be waiting for them was the north gate of the rampart surrounding the city. Little-frequented by people under normal circumstances, the spot was especially empty now that the army was gathering to respond to the surprise attack. In the clear blue light of the early morning, all that Layla could see were collapsed remnants of the stone wall, and all she could hear was the mingled sound of the ocean waves and Matthias's heavy breathing.

They turned a corner of the rampart, and Riette spotted them. Rejoicing, he shouted, “Matthias! Hurry! We've got to go!”

The ambulance was waiting right at the designated spot. It was clear from Riette's anxious expression that there was no time to spare.

Matthias made it to the ambulance in the blink of an eye. Riette opened the passenger door, and Matthias placed Layla, his precious cargo, on the middle seat, next to Kyle. She grabbed his sleeve. Placing his hand on hers, he whispered, “Leah.”

When she realized why he was saying this name, a smile spread across her tear-moistened lips.

As he started to turn away, she grabbed his hand more tightly and said, “W-we need one more! What if it's a boy?”

“Hmm...” He furrowed his brow as if he hadn't considered this possibility. After a moment, he calmly said, “Felix.”

Riette's eyes widened as he heard the name.

Duke Felix von Herhardt was Matthias's grandfather, the man

who had brought prosperity to the Herhardt family in a rapidly changing time. By giving this name to his son, Matthias was essentially designating him as his successor, the future duke who would carry on the family honor.

Riette looked blankly at Layla, wondering if she realized the significance of the choice of name.

Nodding like a well-behaved child, she kept a stiff upper lip as she tearfully let go of Matthias's sleeve.

He had promised her everything and asked her to marry him. She had accepted his proposal. But now it was time for them to part. It was time for her to take off and leave him there.

*Damn it,* Riette muttered, holding back his tears.

There wasn't time to take in the emotion of the moment. As soon as Matthias stepped back, Riette hurried into the vehicle and sat in the passenger seat. Sitting in between two large men, Layla was almost completely hidden.

There was no time for goodbyes, so the ambulance started moving immediately. Standing in front of the ruined rampart, Matthias watched the vehicle start to drive off. Just as he was about to turn back, the ambulance came to an abrupt stop.

The passenger door opened, and Riette got out. Then Layla stumbled out of the ambulance and started running towards Matthias.

# Chapter 143:
## Wishes

As Layla ran wildly towards him, Matthias ran towards her as well. Once they were near each other, he put his arm around her to help her keep her balance. She could feel that he was shaking just as much as she was.

“Layla,” he whispered, unsure what else to say.

She looked at him square in the face. Her tear-filled eyes glistened like emeralds in the morning sun. She stood for a moment without saying anything, only breathing deeply in and out. Then she hurriedly untied the ribbon from the end of her French braid.

He understood why she was doing this at once.

Sure enough, she grabbed his arm and tied the ribbon to his wrist, just like the strings she had used to tie to the legs of Arvis's migratory birds.

That was all. She couldn't bring herself to say anything to him. She was worried that if she opened her mouth, something foolish would come out.

He looked alternately at the white ribbon on his wrist and at her face, and then smiled and nodded. It was the same smile, tinged with playful arrogance, that had taken her breath away many times before.

The alarm calling for the troops to gather started sounding again.

Her lips began to quiver, but she didn't let her tears fall. He caressed her rosy cheek and nodded once more, saying, “Go, Layla.” He brushed her wind-swept hair off her face and stooped down to kiss her tear-stained cheek. Then he whispered, “I love you.”

Even with the siren blaring in the background, she heard his voice loud and clear, and recognized that this was their last moment together for the time being. She knew she had to return to the ambulance, where Kyle and Riette were urgently calling for her.

Matthias turned and started walking towards the siren, which

was going off in the square.

As soon as she turned away from him and started running back towards the ambulance, she burst into tears. Even as she sobbed like a little girl, however, she didn't stop running or look back. She didn't want to make things harder for Matthias. To her reasoning, the easier it was for him to part from her now, the easier it would be for him to come back to her when the time came. Just like her beloved Arvis birds, which always returned to her without fail.

The ruined city looked ghastly in the bright morning sunlight. Before turning the corner of the rampart, Matthias looked over his shoulder at Layla. As she ran, her loose blonde hair fluttered against her back, like a bird's wings.

He paused for a moment to take in the sight of those beautiful golden waves amid the ashen ruins. Then he turned again and started running towards what was about to become a fierce battlefield.

That morning, Ettarre's large military officially entered the war alongside its Southern Alliance allies and broke through the Northern Alliance's line of defense at the coast. On that dazzlingly bright autumn day in Sienne, the largest battle of the war ensued.

* * *

Downtown Ratse was full of newsboys selling extra editions of the newspaper. Claudine glanced out of the window of the café and saw yet another depressing headline. By now she was used to this, as were the ladies sitting across from her.

For months now, there had been nothing but bad news coming from the war's front line. After winning battle after battle in the first stages of the war, the Berg military had lost the battle with Ettarre, and the Southern Alliance had recaptured Sienne. Ever since then, Berg had been struggling in the war, and the front line had been gradually receding northward.

More recently, the Northern Alliance had launched a full-scale attack to great success. This had leveled the playing field somewhat,

but not enough for it to be cause for celebration yet. The year was coming to an end, and it seemed that the emperor's promise that the victorious soldiers would come home before the new year was not going to pan out.

“Don't worry, Lady Claudine. Duke Herhardt will be safe,” one of the ladies at the table said after noticing the look on Claudine's face.

“That's right,” another lady said. “No matter how bad things get on the battlefield, the duke will surely make it home safe and sound.”

*Duke Herhardt...? Ah, yes. My distinguished fiancé,* Claudine thought with a subtle grin on her face.

Officially, Matthias and Claudine were still engaged, so it was only proper for her to act worried about him. She deftly maintained this charade on the surface, while inside she didn't care whether he lived or died.

Earlier in the year, she had ardently hoped that he would return alive and become her husband, but these feelings had vanished with the changing of the seasons. She no longer knew what she wanted. Nor did she know why she was continuing to pretend like they were engaged. Sometimes she even hoped that she would hear of his death in battle. That would be the cleanest way to break off the engagement, after all.

*And then what?* she asked herself. Her eyes quivered at this question.

She received letters from the battlefield frequently. Naturally, they all came from Riette. She and Matthias had never exchanged letters, even before the war.

She had been getting news about Layla through letters from Riette. Upon learning that the duke had gone all the way to Sienne just to find that orphan girl, she didn't even get angry. When she learned that Layla was pregnant with the duke's child, she simply laughed.

*Our engagement is over,* she thought to herself, finally accepting

what she had been in denial about for months.

However, she did not want to let the engagement end in a way that benefited the duke. He and Layla were the ones who had done wrong, so they were the ones who should suffer.

*I hope they die,* she calmly thought. *Yes, I hope that the duke, that lowly orphan, and their baby all vanish from the earth.*

If her hope were to become a reality, then the engagement would automatically be canceled, and Claudine would be able to make a fresh start without any stains in her reputation. Marrying the cousin of her dead fiancé was not the best look, but it wasn't bad enough to ruin her honor.

*Yes, if they die, I'll be able to write a response to Riette at once.*

Even as she continued to participate in the conversation with the other ladies at the café, Claudine thought of nothing but Riette's letter. Specifically, it was his declaration of love that was sticking in her mind.

She had thought that she had lost him forever. When she read that he still loved her, she cried tears of joy. However, she didn't feel ready to write a response right away.

She wanted everything to be perfect. This time, she wanted a marriage full of both love and honor, not a flashy facade with nothing underneath like her engagement to the duke had been. To that end, she was ready to cry loudly at Matthias's funeral, if he would only hurry up and die. Of course, she would be crying out of joy, not sadness.

After exchanging pleasantries with the other ladies for a short while longer, she rose from her seat.

With the war raging across the continent, lavish high-society events had ceased. It seemed like every day there was news of another young man from an aristocratic family dying on the battlefield. It was a gloomy winter, full of funerals and lamentation. The ladies were meeting in Ratse because they were all attending a funeral there.

Claudine got into the Brandt family car that was waiting for her

outside the café, and was driven out of the downtown area. She sat quietly for a while, lost in thought, until something outside caught her eye just as the car had turned onto the boulevard on which the natural history museum and the art museum were located.

There was a blonde woman with glasses walking down the sidewalk in front of the natural history museum. The distance was too great to make out much detail, but she looked quite familiar.

“Is something the matter, Miss?” Claudine's maid asked.

Claudine thought for a moment, then shook her head and leaned back into her seat.

Could it have been Layla?

The last thing she had heard about Layla from Riette was that Matthias had tracked her down and abducted her, after she had escaped while pregnant with his child.

Could Matthias have sent her here? To Ratse?

Whatever was going on, Claudine didn't want to be involved in the messy affairs of those two anymore. The only feeling towards them that she still retained was the wish that they would die in the war.

All in all, it was an ordinary day. Before going to bed, she wished that another letter would come from Riette, and that this time she would be able to send a response letter back, even if only a short one. Miraculously, her wish came true the next morning.

“Miss Claudine! A letter just arrived from Marquess Lindman!” her maid shouted, smiling brightly as she entered Claudine's bedroom.

Claudine had been lounging in bed, sipping her morning tea. As soon as she heard that a letter had arrived from Riette, she sprung from bed with just as much excitement as her maid was displaying. It was only after she had run barefoot over to her maid and taken the letter from her that she realized how indecorously she was behaving.

Blushing slightly, she found her slippers and put them on. The maid pretended not to notice her mistress's impropriety.

Meanwhile, the bedroom door flung open without a knock. It was Countess Brandt, showing just as much disregard for proper etiquette as her daughter. “Oh, Claudine! What ever will you do?!”

Before the startled Claudine could say a word, her mother had burst into tears. In her hand, the countess was holding the morning newspaper.

Claudine's heart started to pound with anticipation.

* * *

Layla's heart always started to race when it was time for the paperboy to deliver the morning newspaper. She could tell that this time had arrived without checking the clock.

She paced in front of the house, anxiously eyeing the corner across the street where the arriving paperboy would first be visible.

Back on that bright autumn morning, she made it safely out of blockaded Sienne by hiding in the ambulance.

After dropping Marquess Lindman off at his rear supply unit, Kyle drove on to the military hospital past the Lovita-Berg border, where he and she parted ways. Then, with nothing to guide her but a strip of paper with an unfamiliar address written on it, she boarded a train headed for Ratse. It was just like when she had taken the train to Karlsbar as a little girl, so many years earlier.

She felt sadness surging inside her, but she didn't let herself cry. This time, she wasn't alone, because she had the baby inside her. And soon enough she would have Matthias as well.

She had no doubt that he would return to them. Thus, all she had to do now was fully recover from her illness, deliver the baby safely, and then the two of them could wait for Matthias to arrive. It was simple. She was sure she could do it.

Several times each day, she renewed her resolve, whispering, We can do it. In this way, she was able to make it through each day. Meanwhile, the seasons changed and the baby continued to grow inside her.

*I'll get to meet you soon, Baby. What a miracle it will be if the war*

*ends soon enough for your father to arrive before you do!*

She knew how unlikely this was to happen, but she wished ardently for it nonetheless.

As confident as she felt about the future, she did worry about the fact that if she were to die in childbirth, there would be no one to look after the baby. Of course, there was the duke's butler and attorney, who had helped her get settled at the new house, but she didn't know them well enough to trust them with her baby's life.

“It's all right. It'll all be just fine,” she whispered to her unborn baby, just as the duke had whispered to her.

It was then that she heard the quick footsteps of someone walking towards her.

Across the wintry street, she saw the paperboy running in her direction.

# Chapter 144:
## A Pure, Bright Light

“What about Claudine? How is she doing?” Countess Brandt asked in a hoarse voice as she wiped another tear from her puffy eyes.

Claudine's maid Marie lowered her eyes, not sure what to say. She neither felt comfortable telling the countess the truth, nor lying to her. “Well...”

Luckily, the countess was in such an emotional state herself that she didn't seem especially concerned about her daughter. “I'm sure she's distraught, but she's got to keep it together,” she said. “We all need to keep a stiff upper lip in these times. You should bring her something to eat. She's going to waste away if she doesn't have a proper meal.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, the maid hurried to carry out the countess's order. Knowing full well that Claudine wouldn't eat it, she prepared some food and brought it to her bedroom. She knocked at the door. When no voice replied, she called to her mistress through the door. “Miss? Miss Claudine?”

Instead of a reply, she heard a wild, pained groan coming from inside the room.

“M-miss! Miss!”

Forgetting propriety, Marie opened the door and entered the room. When she saw the state her mistress was in, she dropped the tray in shock.

Claudine, normally so mild-mannered, was on the floor in her pajamas, sobbing hysterically. In her hand was a letter. “Go away!” she shrieked once she noticed that her maid was there. “Leave, Marie!”

“But, Miss...”

“Please, get out of my room! Please, Marie…” She lowered her head and started beating the ground.

The maid didn't dare approach any closer.

She was perplexed. Claudine had seemed to be doing just fine for the previous several days.

Curled up on the floor, Claudine started sobbing again. The maid hovered anxiously by the door for a short while, and then left the bedroom.

Now that she was alone again, Claudine started wailing even more vehemently. She could hardly remember how she had ended up on the floor, sobbing like this. She had simply read the letter. After a sleepless night, morning had come, and then, finding the morning unbearable, she had simply picked up the letter again and read it.

*I love you, Claudine.*

He had declared his love several times through the course of the letter.

*I know what you're afraid of. Perhaps what you're fearing will become a reality. But Claudine, I promise you that I'll love you so much, you'll forget about all of that.*

After sending that letter, in which he declared his absolute love and commitment to her, he died.

The obituary in the newspaper that the countess had brought her was not for Duke Herhardt, but for Marquess Lindman. She received his love letter and the news of his death at the same time. There had been an enemy air raid to sever the rear supply route, and in the ensuing battle, Riette had been shot and killed.

“No... No! No!!” Claudine screamed, while behind her the pale sunlight of the winter morning flowed in through the window.

For several days afterward, she remained in a state of shock.

*So that's it,* she flatly thought. *You sent me that letter full of your passionate love for me, and then you died. The man whose death I wished for continues to walk the earth, while you, the man I was waiting for, are gone. You vanished before I could ever tell you I love you. Well, I love you, Riette. I love you, I love you, I love you. That's all I had to*

*say to you, but I never could. Why did it have to be like this? Why?*

She turned her eyes to his letter once more, and started reading it aloud. When she reached the first *"I love you,"* she felt like she was sinking into a bottomless pit of despair.

Struggling to breathe, she beat her chest, dropping the letter. Reaching to catch the letter as it fell, she collapsed to the floor.

As she held the letter to her chest, she thought that she could feel warmth amid the ink and paper. It was as if the warmth of Riette's hands had been transferred into the letter itself. When she listened carefully, she thought she could hear his wonderful voice and the sound of his laughter as well. At that moment, she felt something deep inside of her break. Whatever it was that had broken, she was certain that she would never be whole again.

"I love you!" she shouted. Struggling to open her tear-filled eyes, she looked out the window. Even without Riette, the world was full of light. It was a pure, bright light.

* * *

The image of those beautiful golden wings fluttering amid the ashen ruins stood out in Matthias's memory. The memory reminded him that he needed to make it through whatever obstacles arose in his path, so that he could make it back to Layla.

He opened his eyes and staggered to his feet. The bright afternoon sunlight stung his eyes.

The soldier next to him, who up until a moment earlier had been exchanging gunfire with the enemy, was now collapsed on the cold, stone floor, covered in blood. He had been hit by shrapnel from a mortar shell. Blood oozed from his head and chest and flowed across the floor until it touched Matthias's boots. It struck Matthias that if he had been the one in front of the window, it would have been him lying lifeless on the floor.

Life and death were one step apart. Perhaps the same had been true of Riette.

Looking at the dead soldier, Matthias felt like he was looking at

his own corpse.

He took a moment to catch his breath, and then picked up the gun he had dropped. Just then, another mortar shell came flying, and he was surrounded by the deafening sound of the stone walls around him starting to crumble from the explosion. However, he kept walking, undeterred.

Despite predictions to the contrary, the enemy had launched their air raid in the middle of the day. They were trying to recapture a city that Berg had occupied a few weeks earlier. The city was the site of a junction where three railways met. This made it an important supply hub, while also making it the site where a fierce battle would inevitably be fought.

As Matthias continued to walk, he spotted an enemy soldier hiding behind a pillar, aiming his gun at him. Without hesitating, Matthias fired his gun. The soldier collapsed without so much as a yelp. Matthias stepped over the dead body and exited the tower.

As he stepped out into the bright sun above the rampart, a cool breeze enveloped him. He could see that the section of the rampart across from him was already half-destroyed by enemy bombing. The spot where he was standing would likely meet a similar fate before long.

It appeared that the enemy, finding it difficult to penetrate Berg's defenses, had decided instead to destroy the ramparts completely in order to enter the city. This was the tactic that the Berg army had chosen while advancing onto the city, so Matthias recognized it at once.

Ettarre's entry into the war had changed many aspects of the front line. Previously, the Southern Alliance had been at a considerable disadvantage as they had lacked siege mortars that could destroy ramparts. Now, however, thanks to Ettarre, they were armed with the same munitions as Berg, and were counterattacking with the same tactics Berg had used during its relentless advance.

“Retreat! Retreat!”

Desperate cries ordering the retreat of the troops assigned to

defend the rampart could be heard among the artillery fire.

Matthias found it odd that the commander was issuing this order now, when over half of the Berg soldiers had already been turned into corpses. He should have issued the order at least an hour earlier, if he wanted more people to listen to it.

Snickering to himself, Matthias quickened his walking pace. He wanted to run, but his body wasn't cooperating.

*Am I injured?* he wondered. However, the incessant noise of the artillery fire was making it hard to think.

The general had not grasped the extent of the enemy's firepower. He had assumed that they would continue fighting in the same reckless manner as before, sending a horde of foot soldiers to attack. Thus, Berg soldiers had been placed along the rampart to defend against this. This had turned out to be a major blunder, however. With the Berg soldiers positioned like this, it was like shooting fish in a barrel for the enemy. However, it was hard to blame the general for this. No one had suspected that the Southern Alliance possessed the same weapons as Berg until the moment the Lovita military fired its first mortar shell.

As Matthias's vision blurred in the bright sunlight, he once again thought he could see those beautiful golden wings fluttering in mid-air. He had been seeing them on a daily basis since sending Layla off. Even amidst disastrous defeats and successful counterattacks, the image of those golden wings motivated him to keep going. The little bird gave him the courage and drive to survive.

“Layla,” he said in a sweet tone, smiling.

He blinked repeatedly, keeping his eyes closed a little longer each time. His urgent steps also slowed, until he was sauntering along like someone enjoying a leisurely stroll. The moment he realized this, he collapsed onto the sun-heated stone surface of the rampart.

He opened his gently shut eyes and looked back at the path he had just walked down. There was a trail of dark-red marks along the floor. It took him a few moments to realize that these marks were his own blood.

He checked his body and discovered that the left half of his uniform was soaked with blood. It seemed that he had been hit in the shoulder blade by shrapnel from a mortar blast. The heaviness of the bleeding suggested that it was quite a severe wound, but oddly, he didn't feel any pain. He simply chuckled hoarsely at the sight of the blood. This wasn't a good sign.

After remaining on the floor looking up at the bright sky for a while longer, he tried to stand up. However, he couldn't muster the strength. He staggered partway up a few times, each time collapsing back to the floor. His breathing gradually grew more labored, and soon he could detect the rusty scent of blood in his breath.

Leaning against the railing, he tried to maintain consciousness. He firmly clutched his head and told himself, *Stand up!* However, it was no use. Meanwhile, his eyelids started to feel very heavy.

The earsplitting artillery fire nearby seemed to recede into the distance, becoming faint and muffled.

He felt like taking a short nap. He thought that if he could just get some rest, he would then be able to stand up and walk again.

*Layla... I'll make it back to you... Just like I promised...*

Just as his eyes were almost completely closed, he noticed the end of a ribbon flapping in the breeze in front of him. It was the hair ribbon that Layla had tied onto his wrist before leaving. Since then, it had become something of a lucky charm for him.

He chuckled as he recalled the sight of her wandering through the forest and riverside of Arvis, looking for migratory birds and tying colored string to their legs. When he thought about how much she had longed for their return, and how joyful she was when they finally did come back, it struck him that she had been a very lonely child.

Looking blankly at the ribbon flapping in the breeze, he thought about her life, and how full it was with people who never returned, no matter how long she waited for them. Finally, he understood why she loved Arvis's migratory birds.

*Layla...* he silently mouthed, unable to make a sound anymore.

He had promised that he would return to her. She had told him she trusted that he would, that she would always trust him. Thus he had to return to her.

Biting his lip, he stood up. Even as his consciousness was growing hazy, the sound of artillery fire remained loud and clear.

He began to stagger along on top of the remains of the rampart, which had been reduced to a dusty pile of rubble. He could barely walk straight, but he didn't stop moving. However, he only made it a few more steps before he fell down again.

He pressed his blood-soaked hands against the floor to support his body. Hoarse laughter continued to flow from his lips. He re-opened his tightly shut eyes, and found that his vision had become a bit clearer again. Tears and sweat collected at the end of his chin and then dripped onto the back of his hands. First one drop, then another.

He kept blinking to try to regain his focus. Each time he did, the tears dripping onto his hands grew thicker. This made him chuckle even more. The smell of blood in his breath was growing stronger.

*I must survive,* he whispered, just as he had been whispering Layla's name before. *I must survive for you, Layla. My Layla, you're waiting for me to come back to you, so I must survive.*

It took even longer for him to muster the strength to stand up this time, but eventually he managed to get to his feet. Wiping his hands across his face, he straightened his posture and started plodding forward. His bloodshot eyes were still half-closed, but he didn't let that slow him down.

He had to keep going. He didn't want to become yet another longed-for thing in that lonely woman's life that would never return to her. He wanted to keep his promise, so that she would forgive him. And then he wanted to start the new life with her that she had described, full of love and nothing else.

Soon he caught sight up ahead of stairs leading down from the rampart. He quickened his pace. Just as he stepped onto the first stair, a mortar shell struck nearby, causing the section of the

rampart where he was to begin to collapse.

As the foundation underneath him started to give way, he saw those bright, golden wings fluttering in front of him. This was his last memory.

*Layla...* he whispered, smiling.

* * *

The news of that day's battle in Lovita did not reach Berg until several days later.

A photograph of Duke Herhardt in his officer's uniform was printed on the front page of the Ratse newspaper's extra edition for New Year's Eve, which was distributed quickly throughout the city.

# Chapter 145:
## New Year's Eve

The morning newspaper remained folded on the table well past noon. Layla wanted to open it, but she was scared of what she might find in it. Her hand hovered over it for a moment before she pulled it away again, just as she had done several times through the morning.

Stepping away from the table, she said some soothing words to her belly, and warmed up a glass of milk. She fidgeted with the curtains, opening them up and then pulling them ever so slightly together again, until she felt that she had gotten them just how she wanted them. Then she threw some more wood on the fire, even though it was already blazing brightly. After doing all this, she finally felt ready to open the newspaper.

Thankfully, she saw no mention of the duke on the front page. She breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that if the duke had died his picture would likely have been printed under the day's headline. After a moment, she started carefully turning through the pages with a trembling hand. When she reached the page that listed the soldiers who had died in the war, she reflexively closed her eyes.

Ever since reading of Marquess Lindman's death, she had become even more frightened of the newspaper. However, she still felt compelled to read it every day.

*"Bye, Miss Llewellyn. Or should I say, Duchess Herhardt?"* Riette had said to her, after stepping out of the ambulance to return to his unit. *"I guess the baby will have been born the next time we meet. I'll come visit so I can see the little one. That's all right with you, isn't it?"*

*"Of course."*

*"Thanks. And… sorry."*

*"What do you mean? Why are you sorry, Marquess?"* she had asked, tilting her head.

With a wry smile reminiscent of Matthias's, he had replied, *"Oh,*

*just this and that. I'm sorry for being mean to you when we were younger. And I'm sorry for what Claudine put you through."*

She hadn't understood why he was apologizing on Claudine's behalf, but there wasn't enough time to get into a discussion about it.

After walking a few steps away, he had looked over his shoulder and shouted, *"Oh! I'm going to pray that the baby only resembles its mother! Especially if it's a boy! Think of it as my gift to my new niece or nephew."*

That playful remark was her final memory of Riette.

She took off her glasses and set them down on the table, then rubbed her teary eyes until they hurt. Her fists felt as cold as ice.

After a while, she read the rest of the names on the list of fallen soldiers. She was relieved to find no other familiar names on the list, but she still felt uneasy.

She decided to take a walk to calm her nerves. Moving at a slow pace, she passed from the residential area to the boulevard where the museums were located, finally reaching the park at the boulevard's end before turning back. Now that she was near the end of her pregnancy, it took her quite a long time to walk even short distances.

"Look at Mommy. I'm waddling like a penguin. See?" she said, giggling, as she looked at her reflection in a shop window. "Oh no! I guess you can't see through my belly. But you'll be able to see soon enough! I guess I won't look like a penguin then, though." She laughed once again as she realized the silly things she was saying.

After pausing a short while to catch her breath, she started carefully walking again. Even with a war going on, there was a lively atmosphere downtown on this final day of the year. All around, there were couples and families with excited faces full of the spirit of New Year's Eve.

"Should we go out for a special dinner tonight?" she asked her belly. "I wonder what kind of food you'll like. Will your taste be more like Mommy's or Daddy's?" She gently rubbed her belly, but

the baby did not move in response. This made her feel a little lonely, so she started stepping more forcefully. “Come to think of it, Mommy doesn't know what Daddy likes to eat. I should've asked him.” Her sullen words turned to steam as they came out of her mouth. “You know, there's a lot I don't know about that guy. I'll have to ask him about everything when he comes back to us.” With that resolution, she picked up her pace. Even so, however, she was the slowest person on the sidewalk.

Just as she was passing by the museums, newsboys selling extra editions appeared.

“Extra, extra, read all about it!”

The sound of their cries dampened the festive atmosphere at once. By now everyone knew that extra editions during wartime usually carried bad news.

Layla came to a stop, feeling an odd sensation in her belly. Her heart started pounding loudly, her breath quickened, and her hands felt frigid inside her mittens. Because of this, she dropped the newspaper she had just purchased.

She wanted to pick it up, but her arms wouldn't move. As she stared down at the newspaper, she saw a very familiar face on the front page, along with an unbelievable headline: *Duke Matthias von Herhardt Killed in Battle While Defending Strategic Point on Southern Front.*

As she slowly blinked, her eyelashes cast quivering shadows on her tear-filled eyes. Suddenly everything felt strange and dreamlike. *Killed in battle...?* The phrase seemed meaningless, as if it were from a foreign language.

*It can't be. He promised he would return to me. That means he will return to me. But it says he was killed in battle. How can that be?*

“Let me get that for you,” a middle-aged woman said, noticing the newspaper Layla was staring at on the ground. She picked it up and placed it in Layla's hands, and then started to walk away.

Before long, however, the newspaper fell to the ground again. This time, Layla fell down with it. Moaning in pain, she tried to

stand up again, but she couldn't manage it. Her unfocused eyes remained helplessly fixed on the front page of the newspaper. Her hand shook as she ran her mitten across the face in the picture.

“Goodness! Are you all right, young lady?” exclaimed the woman who had just helped her. As the woman ran towards Layla, the eyes of everyone nearby followed her. “This young lady needs help! Please!” the woman shouted urgently as she watched Layla pant and clutch her belly. “I think she's going into labor! She needs to be taken to the hospital! Right now!”

* * *

“It's a lie. I will not believe it. It's simply impossible!”

Elise von Herhardt's piercing voice echoed in the silent drawing room. Besides Elise, the room was full of relatives who had quickly gathered upon news of Matthias's death. They were all looking at Elise.

“I understand how you feel,” one of the relatives said, “but you need to accept reality-”

“My son is not dead! He can't have died! It's inconceivable, I'm telling you!” Elise exclaimed, shaking her head so vigorously that her elegant chignon came undone and her hair spilled down onto her shoulders. She then rose from her seat and approached Dowager Herhardt, saying, “You agree, don't you? Please tell them. Please say it isn't so, it can't be so.”

“Oh my...” Katharina replied. As she watched her daughter-in-law tearfully pleading with her, her own eyes started to fill with tears again. She had lost her husband, her son, and now her grandson. She cursed her own longevity as she reflected on how her long life had been full of so much sadness. “I think we need to accept it, Elise,” she said, wiping her tears with her handkerchief. “For the sake of Matthias's honor, we need to accept that he is gone. Surely you realize that, don't you?” The calm rationality of her words was belied by the shakiness in her voice.

Elise glared resentfully at her mother-in-law, then sobbed

mournfully for a moment, and then staggered and fell to the floor.

The news of Matthias's death had caused yet another stir at Arvis. The Arvis staff were frantically busy serving and taking care of the guests who had flocked to the estate. Hessen, as the butler in charge of the whole staff, wasn't able to sit down at his desk until late into the night. Just as he was starting to feel the sadness that he had been repressing all day, he was interrupted by a servant rushing into his office.

"Mr. Hessen, Mr. Stauf is on the telephone. He says he urgently needs to speak with you."

Mr. Stauf, the attorney in charge of the Herhardt family's internal legal issues, had secretly helped Layla get settled in Ratse, as the duke had instructed. If he was calling this late at night, it had to be an emergency.

Hessen ran to the phone and picked up the receiver.

"Miss Llewellyn is at the hospital," Mr. Stauf said. "She went into labor earlier today."

Hessen's eyes widened. "Isn't this earlier than expected?"

"It is. Perhaps it was because of the shock of learning that His Grace Duke Herhardt passed away. I've only just spoken with the hospital. I wanted to contact you before I departed."

"I see. Thank you, Mr. Stauf. I'll attend to my duties at once."

Hessen hung up the receiver with a trembling hand. *A baby born on the day its father's death is announced to the world!* He closed his eyes to try to stop them from filling with tears. *Should I let people know?*

If the baby turned out to be a boy, it would become Duke Herhardt's sole heir. Revealing the baby's existence would prevent a bitter fight from breaking out among Herhardt relatives over the question of succession. In that respect, it seemed like a good idea.

However, the duke had clearly stated that he didn't want that. He had left everything up to Layla Llewellyn's choice. And even if he was no longer alive, Matthias von Herhardt was still Hessen's master.

Biting his lip, the butler stepped out into the dark hallway.

* * *

The baby was born on New Year's Eve. Late at night, not long before the midnight bell would ring in the new year, the baby announced itself with a high-pitched cry.

A nurse wrapped the newborn in a white swaddling cloth and placed it in the arms of its mother, who had bravely endured the pain of childbirth alone. A mixture of joy and fear spread across Layla's pale, drowsy face.

“The baby is healthy,” the nurse said, smiling. “It's a little small, but it has no health problems at all.”

“Really...?” Layla asked, looking worriedly at the nurse.

The baby had been through many hardships while it was in her belly, and now it had been delivered prematurely. Layla's lips were quivering with concern.

“Absolutely. Look for yourself,” the nurse replied. She helped Layla adjust her posture so that she could hold the baby more comfortably, and then took a step back.

Layla cautiously looked down at the baby in her arms.

As she gently stroked its black hair, it wriggled its tiny body. Its skin looked very pale, perhaps because of the contrast with its dark hair.

After staring blankly for a moment, Layla grinned slightly and caressed the baby's cheek. Her eyes filled with tears as she felt the unbelievable softness of its skin. Just then, the bell started ringing in the distance. As if in response, the baby opened its eyes for a moment before shutting them tightly again.

In that brief moment, Layla saw that they were the same beautiful shade of blue as its father's. Tears flowed down Layla's cheeks, wetting her smiling lips.

As she cried these tears of joy while the New Year's bell rang in the background, she whispered, “Our baby is so pretty. Won't you come and see? Please?”

# Chapter 146:
## Summer Again

Winter gave way to spring, and spring gave way to summer.

After an arduous war in which both sides suffered heavy casualties, the Northern Alliance finally emerged victorious. In many ways it was a pyrrhic victory—the gains were small and the losses were large. However, in the eyes of history, the victory would stand as another glorious achievement brightening the legacy of the Berg Empire.

“It's a dismal sort of glory, isn't it?” a noblewoman remarked, sighing deeply as she stood in line to greet the victorious soldiers returning to the empire. “I suppose at the very least it's fortunate that the war ended before all of the empire's families had their lines of succession cut off.”

The other noblewomen standing near her nodded in agreement, and started naming various young men who would never return to their families.

“Who will the Herhardt family choose as their successor?”

As soon as Matthias von Herhardt was mentioned, the conversation naturally shifted to what had become the hottest topic for gossip lately—the question of who would become the next duke.

Since Matthias had no siblings and had died without fathering an heir, the title of Duke Herhardt would have to go to a collateral member of the family. However, Elise von Herhardt was stubbornly insisting that the choice of a successor be deferred until after they had recovered her son's body and held a proper funeral for him. Thus, for the time being, the Herhardt family remained with no one at its head.

“They really shouldn't have delayed his wedding to Lady Claudine. If he had married her when he was originally supposed to, the line of succession wouldn’t have been tragically cut off like this.”

“Even if they had married, it doesn't mean that Claudine would have borne him a son. Claudine's mother never bore a son, after all.”

“That's true, I suppose.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“The Brandt family is lucky. If they had forced the wedding through before Duke Herhardt joined the war, all they would have gotten for it is a widowed daughter.”

“How is Claudine doing, by the way?”

“I heard that she's going to be engaged again soon!”

“Oh my, already?”

“I suppose there's no point in wasting time now that her connection to the Herhardt family has been severed. From what I hear, Countess Brandt has been working hard to find a new man for her daughter, and apparently she's found a good candidate.”

“No matter how good of a candidate he is, no one could compare to Duke Herhardt. Oh, I feel so bad for Claudine and her mother.”

As the women continued exchanging words of sympathy and relief, excited cheers began to ring out from across the street. The homecoming parade had begun.

* * *

Practically everyone in the city had gone to greet the soldiers returning from the war. As a result, the park was completely empty, and Layla was able to enjoy an especially relaxing stroll with her baby. Her slow, light footsteps, the wheels of the baby carriage, and the rustling of the leaves all combined like a beautiful piece of music.

As she emerged from the tree-lined path, she extended the carriage's canopy to protect her sleeping baby from the sun. By now, Layla had completely forgotten her worries about the baby being born small, as it was very healthy and growing rapidly. It had a gentle personality, and it hadn't gotten sick even once. It was truly a blessing.

Layla took a circuitous route, intentionally avoiding the boulevard. The sound of her slow footsteps continued along the quiet path. She didn't have the courage to face the parade. She still couldn't accept that Matthias wasn't returning even though the war was over.

“The weather sure is nice today, isn't it?” she asked her sleeping baby.

The breeze blew the baby's soft hair.

“Summer is Mommy's favorite season. What's yours? Oh, right, I guess you still haven't experienced autumn.”

The edges of her smile trembled slightly.

She continued to whisper to the sleeping baby as she pushed the carriage. Before she knew it, she was back near the house.

The house had been intended as a temporary dwelling place for her until Matthias returned, but now it had become her new home. Matthias's attorney and butler had both worked hard to ensure that everything Matthias had promised would become reality, so that Layla and the baby could live a stable life.

*It's been so peaceful, hasn't it? I'm sure it will keep being peaceful, too. Even though he's not here. Even though he hasn't come back.*

To stave off the sadness that was creeping up on her, she quickened her pace. Before she got very far, however, she had to stop again. Her shoe had come untied.

After letting out a brief sigh, she bent down and started tying the laces. Just as she was finishing the knot, a memory flashed into her mind out of nowhere.

She recalled the day she had spent with him in an unfamiliar city, when everything had been so strange. The image of him kneeling down to tie her shoelaces for her was so vivid in her mind, it was like he was right there in front of her.

She recalled his calm, blue eyes, the gentle warmth of his body, the feeling of his hands against her shoe, and the way the tidy knot he tied bounced with each step she took.

As the memory grew more and more distinct, her eyes filled with

tears. However, she didn't let a single tear fall.

After catching her breath, she finished tying the knot and stood up. As she resumed pushing the carriage, her steps were even lighter and more lively than before, and the tears in her eyes dried away without falling.

When she arrived back home, there was a tall man in a military uniform facing the house. Her eyes widened as he slowly turned around. The two of them looked at each other with identical smiles on their faces.

“Kyle!”

As its mother cried out joyfully, the baby opened its eyes.

* * *

While Layla made some tea, Kyle waited in the sunny living room with the baby. Sure enough, the baby was incredibly calm and well-behaved, and hadn't cried even when it first saw Kyle. For a moment, it had stared at the unfamiliar face with a look of surprise. After only a few seconds, however, this had given way to delighted laughter. Kyle was relieved to discover that, even though the baby's blue eyes looked just like the duke's, their personalities seemed quite distinct.

When Layla entered the room carrying the tea, Kyle smiled and asked, “What's its name?”

“Felix,” she replied, smiling back at him. Then she picked up little Felix and sat down across from Kyle.

The old friends then proceeded to have an ordinary conversation, catching up with each other in a way they hadn't been able to do during the war. He smiled as it struck him how remarkable it was that he was sitting across from her in that moment.

“I'm so glad that you made it back safe and sound, Kyle,” she said, smiling calmly.

“I feel the same way about you,” he replied, smiling back at her as he set his tea cup down. “I'm so glad that you recovered your health and had this beautiful baby.”

“Well, we promised each other, right?”

“Ah yes, you're right.”

His eyes grew slightly moist as he was reminded of their last moments together the previous autumn.

The original plan was for him to accompany her all the way to Ratse. He had obtained a travel pass for this purpose, but after Ettarre joined the war, all travel passes were canceled. He felt horrible sending Layla off when she was still recovering from her illness, not to mention pregnant. However, she cheerfully reassured him that she would be all right.

That day, as they parted at the military hospital by the border, they promised each other that they would meet again in a healthy state. She extended her hand for a handshake. The moment he started shaking her hand, he lost his emotional restraint and burst into tears. She comforted him once again, and then left. As she walked off carrying her suitcase, she knew her gaunt back was shaking, but Kyle didn't say anything. That had been their last moment together.

“Does the House of Herhardt know about Felix?” he asked, looking at the giggling baby sitting on its mother's lap.

She shook her head and lowered her eyes.

“Are you planning to keep raising him alone like this?”

“Yes, until the duke comes back.”

His eyes widened at this unexpected response. “Layla...”

“He promised,” she said, smiling, as she stroked the baby's hair. “He promised that he would come back to me. So... I'm going to wait for him.”

“But Layla, he's-”

“I know. I know that, Kyle.” Her eyes filled with tears, but she didn't lose her smile. “But I still want to wait for him. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I feel like if I keep waiting, he might come.”

*What can I say to her? She's waiting for a dead man to come to her,* Kyle thought.

He had seen with his own eyes the catastrophic ruins of the city.

The ramparts that had stood for centuries had been reduced to rubble. Practically every Northern Alliance soldier that fought in that battle had been killed. If Kyle hadn't been assigned to transport wounded soldiers to the field hospital, his own corpse would have likely been buried amidst the rubble as well.

There was a lot he wanted to tell Layla, but he kept his silence. After all, the war was over now, so the duke's body might be recovered soon. Perhaps that would allow her to finally accept reality.

After that, their conversation returned to ordinary matters. However, they both knew that things could never be like before. This realization brought him an odd sense of relief.

“I should get going. My train will be leaving soon,” he said, checking his watch as he rose from his seat.

“You're going back to Karlsbar, right?”

“Yeah. I'm going to stay with my parents until it's time to resume my studies.”

“I see.”

They walked to the front door, and he said, “Take care of yourself, Layla. Felix too.” And then he extended his hand for a handshake, just like he had done on that summer day when he was twelve years old, when he had first encountered that girl amid the fresh scent of roses in the Arvis garden.

He knew it was really goodbye this time. Perhaps they would run into each other from time to time, and exchange pleasant greetings. But that would be it. He knew that was the most he could hope for, and he was finally able to accept that.

“We will. And you too, Kyle,” she replied, accepting his handshake and smiling, just as she had done as a young girl on that summer day in Arvis.

The baby looked with curiosity at the two people shaking hands, and then burst into cheerful laughter.

Without tears or anguish, Kyle then turned around and started walking down the road. A cool breeze lessened the summer heat.

Without looking back, he walked all the way to the bend in the road, and then passed out of sight.

* * *

A lavish black car pulled up in front of the military hospital in the south of Lovita. The uniformed chauffeur hurried to open the back passenger door, and then an elderly gentleman with a tired face stepped out.

The officers standing in a row to greet him all bowed their heads respectfully. “Thank you for coming,” one of them said.

The distinguished gentleman was a collateral member of the Lovita royal family, and had been ordered to visit this remote location by none other than the king of Lovita himself. When he had received the message stating that there was an important matter that the king needed investigated, he had known he had no choice but to follow the order.

A favorite nephew of the king had been severely injured in the war, and was receiving treatment at a Berg military hospital. When the Lovita royal family asked for his speedy return, Berg had placed certain conditions on the deal. It was this gentleman's burdensome task to come check on whether these conditions had been met. He had been selected for the task because he was the cousin of Katharina von Herhardt.

“We have already confirmed his identity through the means available to us, but we wanted a relative to give final confirmation. That is why we requested your presence,” the officer explained as he guided the gentleman through the quiet ward. “He's in here.”

They stopped in front of a room at the end of the hallway. The gentleman nodded, and the officer knocked on the door and then opened it.

Inside the room, a young man was sitting by the window, smoking a cigarette. He stood up to greet the visitor. A breeze blew through the open window, shaking the tails of his untucked shirt. Because he was standing in front of the bright window, it was hard

to make out his face, but it was clear that he was a tall, strong young man.

The gentleman clicked his tongue as he observed that the man didn't look sick or injured at all.

He had heard that the man was an officer who had been found severely injured amid the ruins of a battle in which the Berg soldiers had been thoroughly defeated. He was an enemy soldier, but to the medic who found him, he was simply a person who had survived the battle. He had thus been transported to the rear military hospital for treatment.

He was in critical condition, and it took quite a long time before he recovered enough to regain consciousness. Eventually, however, he had made a miraculous recovery. Then, rather than being sent to a prison camp, he had been sent to a very nice hospital. This was because of his status as a high-ranking aristocrat.

The Herhardt family had been ready to hold the funeral as soon as the war ended and they recovered the body. It seemed that this man had been playing a trick on everyone. The gentleman wondered what possible reason someone could have for doing nothing when he surely knew that everyone back home thought he was dead. Even considering the chaos of war, the gentleman felt that the doctors who believed this fraudster's words should be dealt with strictly by the military courts.

Just as the gentleman's anger was starting to rise, the young man tossed his cigarette into the ashtray and slowly walked towards the gentleman. The gentleman gasped as he observed that the young man's elegant posture and movements perfectly matched those of the duke. The young man gazed calmly at him, with a slight smile on his lips, and then nodded slightly to greet him.

Taken aback, the gentleman could only chuckle in response.

# Chapter 147:
## The Color of My Happiness

With the war over, the tight restrictions on border crossing had been loosened. The car passed through the border checkpoint without even an inspection, and then proceeded onto the road leading into Berg. The Berg countryside, which had seen no battles during the war, was incredibly peaceful and serene. It was as if nothing had happened but the changing of the seasons.

Matthias gazed calmly out the window at the verdant scenery flowing by. He remained silent for the entire long trip to Ratse.

After losing consciousness as the rampart beneath him caved in, he had awoken in bed in a Lovitan military hospital. As he felt the horrible pain throughout his body, he realized that he had survived.

*I'm alive,* he thought. *I can return to Layla.*

This wonderful thought brought him far more relief than the painkillers coursing through his veins. Despite his pain, he laughed with joy. Then, as the medicine took effect and he fell asleep, he dreamed of Layla. It was beautiful.

After that, his pain gradually lessened, but he remained bedridden for quite some time. By the time he was able to move around freely, the spring flowers were in full bloom.

He was well aware that Berg newspapers had likely reported him as missing or dead. He was also aware that, even with the war going on, it would have been possible to send a message alerting those in Berg that he was alive. However, he instead decided to wait it out, and he let two seasons pass without sending any messages to Berg.

It wasn't hard for him to make it through that time, because by waiting like that, he was laying the groundwork so that he could openly live with Layla.

Of course, he knew it would be hard on Layla, and on his family, all of whom would be needlessly grieving over his supposed death.

However, like all decisions he had made with regards to Layla, he did not regret it. Nor would he ever regret it.

“We're almost there, Your Grace,” the chauffeur said, joyfully, as he turned onto the boulevard where the museums were located.

In contrast to his assistant and the chauffeur, whose eyes were filled with tears, Matthias had a calm, emotionless expression on his face. He nodded, and adjusted his clothes, even though they were already perfect. Then he sat up straighter in his seat and looked down the boulevard at the residential area up ahead.

It wouldn't be long now, but it wasn't quite time yet. He had some tasks to complete first, but they wouldn't take too long. The Herhardt family's Ratse mansion came into sight. A faint smile spread over his face.

* * *

Elise von Herhardt remained skeptical until the end. She understood that the chances were very low that it was a mistake, but she still hesitated to believe. After all, she had already accepted that her son was dead, and had been fully prepared to hold the funeral once his body was recovered. Now she was being told that he was coming home alive!

If this turned out to be a lie, she didn't think she would be able to handle it. This was why she insisted that the matter be kept secret to the outside world. She wasn't going to believe anything until she saw it with her own eyes.

Hurrying into the drawing room, Hessen said, “The car has just arrived.”

Elise and Katharina looked at each other with expressions full of nervous anticipation. The staff members in the room began to stir, and soon the slow, regular rhythm of someone's footsteps could be heard approaching the room. As Elise watched the door of the room with bated breath, tears were already forming in her eyes. Dowager Herhardt was no different.

Both of them recognized those footsteps at once. It could be no

one else but Matthias. Sure enough, after a short while, the door slowly opened, and Matthias miraculously appeared.

Katharina and Elise both burst into tears at once. Matthias slowly approached them, then came to a stop in the middle of the room, where he was illuminated by a square of sunlight streaming in through the window.

With the same calm, respectful elegance that he had displayed while bidding them farewell before he went off to the war, he greeted them. “Hello, Grandmother. And hello, Mother. I've returned.”

* * *

Layla put on her wide-brimmed straw hat and tied its ribbon under her chin. She then grabbed the blanket and the snacks she had prepared and stuffed them into her bag. Once she put the strap of the bulging bag over her shoulder, she was ready to head out for the picnic. Her French braid bounced behind her as she stepped out of the house with the baby in her arms.

As if relieved that he was no longer in the cramped space of his mother's belly, Felix was growing at an impressive rate. Layla had checked and discovered that he was bigger than the average baby his age. It delighted her to think that he was probably going to grow up to be tall like his father, even if that meant that Felix would quickly become too heavy for her to lift him.

After putting him into the baby carriage, she started pushing it and walking towards the park. It was a typical Berg summer day—the sun was bright but not too hot, and there was a refreshing breeze blowing.

The baby seemed to be in a particularly good mood, and was babbling excitedly. As they progressed towards the park, Layla would point things out, saying, “Look at that!” In response, Felix would giggle delightedly and waggle his little arms and legs.

*Was Matthias like this as a baby?* she wondered. However, it was impossible to imagine Matthias von Herhardt behaving with this

much innocent joviality, even as a baby. Rather, she imagined that even when he was Felix's age, Matthias showed just as much aristocratic reserve as he did now. This thought made her giggle, which caused Felix to giggle as well. Just then, they arrived at the park.

It was a weekend, and the park was bustling with people enjoying the nice weather. As she surveyed the crowd, Layla pouted briefly at the sight of all the young couples with their babies, but then she quickly recovered her smile. Seeing his mother smile, Felix then smiled too. That was all she needed.

Adjusting the strap of her bag, she pushed the carriage towards a quiet, pretty spot by the forest. As they passed by the fountain at the center of the park, she bought a colorful balloon from a man at a kiosk. She tied the balloon's string to the carriage, and Felix's blue eyes widened in amazement.

Blue was no longer the color of sadness to Layla. Now it was the color of the greatest happiness she had ever known. This had been the case ever since Felix had first opened his eyes. Or rather, it had been the case since the first morning that she and Matthias had spent together, when they had lain in bed, quietly gazing into each other's eyes. Or perhaps it had been since even earlier than that. The more she thought about it, the less certain she was of when the shift had occurred.

“Wow! The balloon is so pretty! Don't you think so?” she exclaimed to Felix, as he gleefully followed the balloon's movements with his eyes while giggling and babbling.

As the balloon continued to be tossed around by the gentle breeze, the carriage it was attached to came to a stop amid the shade of the park's forest. The sound of the baby's laughter mingled with that of his mother, who looked at home amid the greenery of the forest.

* * *

Matthias, the masterpiece of the House of Herhardt, had

miraculously returned, and he looked just the same as before he had left. Despite looking the same, however, he said something completely unexpected.

“Layla is here.”

He said this in such a calm tone, his mother doubted her ears.

He had just finished giving his account of the injuries he had suffered on the front line of the war, followed by his time in the Lovitan hospital and his return to Berg. He had also apologized for the concern he had caused by neglecting his responsibilities. Elise had been surprised, but also relieved, to see him looking the same as always after returning from the brink of death.

Now that he was speaking about Layla, however, she was utterly shocked. Not knowing what to say, she turned to her mother-in-law.

While the two women exchanged flustered looks, Matthias continued calmly talking.

“My child is here too.”

Elise and Katharina, having barely regained their composure, reacted with even more shock than before.

“Goodness!” Elise exclaimed, almost falling from her seat.

Katharina froze with astonishment. While they had already guessed that Matthias and Layla had been in a relationship together, they had never imagined that there was a baby.

“Layla and I are going to be married,” he said, remaining just as calm and nonchalant as he had been since his arrival.

“Matthias!” Elise shouted.

Katharina let out an exasperated sigh and slumped in her chair.

“An illegitimate child?” Elise asked. “That's certainly a cause for concern. But there are many other ways to take care of this situation.”

“Your mother is right, Matthias. Since your engagement to Lady Claudine has been cut off, there are plenty of other ladies from distinguished families to consider, so...” Katharina trailed off, clutching her aching head.

After thinking for a while longer, it suddenly struck her why

Matthias had stayed alone in a hospital in an enemy country for all that time, when he could have easily contacted his Lovitan relatives. By allowing the news of his supposed death to spread throughout Berg, he had gotten something very valuable for himself. Elise seemed to have made the same realization. The two women exchanged knowing glances.

"I know this is hard for both of you to accept," Matthias continued. He was paying no mind to the looks of suspicion on the women's faces. In fact, he was behaving in much the same way as he had when the two women had first suspected he was in a relationship with Layla. "However, the world is changing at an ever-increasing rate. Things aren't the way they used to be."

"Matthias..."

"To be honest, it doesn't matter whether the world changes or not."

He didn't seem to be trying very hard to persuade them. Rather, he sounded merely like he was informing them of decisions he had already made.

"If you really can't accept it, then I won't stubbornly insist on burdening the Herhardt name with these troubles."

"What do you mean by that?" Elise asked, barely able to muster her voice.

"I will no longer live as a Herhardt."

"Matthias!"

"Henceforth, the name 'Duke Matthias von Herhardt' will refer to the honorable nobleman who died in battle while fighting for the empire."

*Goodness.* Gone was the joy that Lady Herhardt had felt at seeing Matthias looking like his old self. Perhaps she didn't know all the ways in which the world was changing, but one thing was clear: the war had completely changed her son.

He was obviously not making an empty threat. After living a perfect life with the singular aim of becoming the perfect successor so that he could carry the mantle as the next Duke Herhardt, he

now seemed determined to follow a different path entirely. And Elise knew her son well enough to realize that he would do whatever was necessary to follow this new path.

Her son had seemingly come back from the dead. And now, she and her mother-in-law had two choices. They could lose him again, or they could accept the things he was telling them.

"This is the decision I have made," he said, looking at both of the women. "I will not be changing my mind."

Elise and Katharina glanced at each other again, then laughed awkwardly.

Unshaken, Matthias said, "The two of you need to make your choice. I will respect whichever option you prefer."

# Chapter 148:
## The Bird Returned

The park in the center of Ratse was large enough to contain a lake and a forest within it. Layla's favorite part of the park was a spot on its western side that had the prettiest view of the lake and the forest. When she sat there, she almost felt like she was back at Arvis. Despite all the pain and sadness that she had suffered at Arvis, she still missed it dearly, and thought it was the most beautiful place in the world.

After spreading out the blanket in the shade of a tree, she took the container of snacks out of her bag. Even though it was just her and the baby, she was determined to have a perfect, pretty picnic. Perhaps Felix was still too young to be able to consciously register the memory, but she figured that the experience would inscribe itself in his heart one way or another.

There was a lot that she wanted to share with Felix—moments of happiness with his mother, even trivial ones; affectionate talk; warm looks; laughter. She wanted him to know that no matter what happened, there was someone in the world who would love and believe in him. Uncle Bill had been such a person to her, and she wanted to be sure that Felix would see her the same way.

Until the duke came back, she intended to shower Felix with a double dose of love and affection. She would make sure that he always had plenty to eat, and plenty to laugh about, so that he would grow up happy and healthy. Even if he didn't have a father right now, he was going to get all the love he deserved.

After feeding Felix, she gave him his rattle, which he became engrossed in playing with. This gave her the freedom to enjoy her own lunch at a leisurely pace.

Just as she was biting into the peach she had brought as dessert, the baby crawled towards her. With each juicy bite she took of the fruit, he bobbled his head in fascination.

As she caught a glimpse of his blue eyes staring at her, she troze. He resembled his father so much, she couldn't stop memories of Matthias from flooding into her mind.

*"I'll return to you. I promise."*

Her memory of him promising to return was just as vivid as ever.

*"I love you."*

She hadn't gotten the chance to reply to him when he told her he loved her.

She took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes, and then looked at the baby and whispered, "I love you. I really love you." She could say this to her heart's content now. It was the most passionate feeling she had. "I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you!"

Felix seemed to like hearing it. As she kept repeating the phrase, his blue eyes twinkled, and he giggled delightedly.

After thoroughly wiping the peach juice from her hands, she lifted the baby into her arms and closed her eyes. The baby's soft scent tickled her nose. She hugged him tighter.

* * *

The woman who lived next door to Layla was on her way back from a stroll around the neighborhood when she stopped suddenly at the sight of a man knocking at Layla's door. "Excuse me, sir...?"

The man stopped knocking and looked in her direction.

"Are you looking for the young lady who lives at this house with her baby?" she asked, with an inquisitive look on her face.

"Yes, I am," he replied.

"The young mother with blonde hair and glasses, right?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

After looking closely at his face for a moment, she gasped and said, "Oh my. Let me guess—you're the baby's father, and you're just now getting back from the war. Is that right? You look just like the baby. I know we haven't met before, so I'm sorry for acting so informal. There was just something so familiar about your face from

the moment I saw you." Before he could respond, she continued. "Oh but how do you like that? You came all the way back from the war, and you've missed her."

"She isn't home?"

"No, she left just a short while ago with the baby. She said they were going to the park to have a picnic," she said, clicking her tongue ruefully.

Her eyes remained fixed on the man's face. She had noticed that the baby didn't particularly resemble its mother, so it was no surprise that it looked so much like its father. However, there was something else about the man's face that seemed extremely familiar to her. It didn't seem like it just because of the baby. She was certain she didn't know him. She must have seen him somewhere before. But where?

"She and the baby go to the park a lot," she went on. "They usually don't come back home until dusk. You could go try to find them, but who knows, you might miss each other again. Maybe you'd better just come wait for her in my house. Would you like to?"

"No, that's all right," he said, glancing in the direction of the park. He walked down the steps from the front door and stopped in front of the woman and said, "Thank you, ma'am." With that, he brushed past her and went on his way at a relaxed pace.

As he reached the end of the road, where a black car was waiting, a man got out of the driver's seat and hurriedly opened the back passenger door. This piqued the woman's curiosity even more. She could tell that he wasn't any ordinary man. She kept watching the car as it drove off into the distance.

"I know I've seen him somewhere before..." she muttered, as a gentle breeze blew through the neighborhood on that quiet weekend afternoon.

* * *

After eating and playing to his heart's content, little Felix fell

asleep. For a while, Layla lay next to him on the picnic blanket, gazing at his angelic face. Then, sighing with relief, she sat up. Her hair, which had become Felix's plaything, was quite disheveled. Her glasses were covered with his tiny fingerprints, making everything she saw through them look blurry. She cautiously inched towards her bag, which was on the edge of the blanket. First she rubbed her glasses clean, then she let down her messy hair.

Felix liked her hair as much as his father did. It thus seemed that he took after his father in more ways than just his appearance, although the son was a bit more reckless than the father in terms of how he treated her hair. Whenever she was holding Felix in her arms, he would become transfixed by her shimmering blonde hair and grab at it with both hands, laughing joyously. She always felt sorry when she had to wrest it out of his grip.

She never would have thought the day would come when having her hair grabbed made her happy. Chuckling to herself about this, she started combing her fingers through her hair to attempt to tame it. Even when she put it in a ponytail or a braid, Felix always managed to grab it. The only way to prevent that would be by cutting it, but she didn't want to do that.

Her fine blonde hair flowed down over the collar and shoulders of her white dress. Just as she was about to start braiding it, she got distracted by the sight of the late-afternoon sunlight streaming through the forest's thick foliage. As she gazed at the light, transfixed, the still surface of the lake started glimmering with a rich, golden hue.

“So pretty...” she muttered.

The whole environment around her looked as peaceful and beautiful as a painting. The time she had spent in that hellish city, where bombs fell from the sky, now felt like a faintly remembered dream.

She pulled her legs towards her chest and rested her cheek on her knees.

Some waterfowl flew leisurely over the lake. They were

migratory birds that spent their summers in Berg. A breeze brushed past the wild rose bushes in the forest, picking up their sweet scent. The rustling of the lush vegetation reminded her of the sound of her bicycle's chain.

Suddenly, her enjoyment of the perfect, beautiful summer day was interrupted by a strange feeling.

*How can it be so nice? He's not here. He hasn't come back.*

The strange feeling slowly grew, until the sound of a baby's crying snapped her back to reality. Felix had awoken, and was staring up at the sky, wailing. She saw the reason at once. The balloon had come untied from the handle of the baby carriage, and it had floated up and gotten caught on a branch of a nearby tree.

“It's all right!” she cried out, trying to calm him down. “It's no big deal. Everything will be just fine!”

Felix stopped crying, stunned by the sudden rise in his mother's energy level. She wiped the tears from his face, and then bolted up and started heading for the tree where the balloon was stuck.

“Don't worry, Mommy will get it for you!”

* * *

The park was huge, and all that Matthias had been told was that she was somewhere within it. Nonetheless, it was easy for him to find her. He knew she would be at a spot near the forest and the lake, where there would be a lot of birds. He knew that she would prefer a relatively quiet spot, without too many people around. Then again, it wouldn't be completely isolated, either—despite the tough front she put on, he knew his beautiful bird was timid at heart.

He headed straight to a spot that fit this description and, sure enough, she was there. Sitting in the shade of the trees on a picnic blanket, she was gazing at the scenery, until her attention was drawn away by a crying baby next to her. It was only then that Matthias realized there was another person there—his child.

He stopped in his tracks to take in the sight. Meanwhile, Layla

sprung up and started walking quickly towards the woods. The baby tilted its head with interest as it watched its mother.

Matthias then resumed walking towards them. He reached the edge of the blanket just as Layla reached the foot of a tree a short distance away.

He looked at her for a moment, wondering what she was up to. Then, all of a sudden, she started climbing up the tree. When he saw the balloon caught on a branch midway up the tree, he finally understood what she was doing.

He chuckled to himself. Just as he did, the baby looked up at him. He looked down, and the two of them made eye contact. He raised his eyebrows slightly. The baby blinked in surprise.

He laughed once more, a little louder this time. When he looked up again, Layla was already straddling the branch, reaching out for the balloon that was caught on it.

Without hesitation, he started walking towards the tree.

* * *

The balloon was caught near the end of the branch, making it hard to reach, but once Layla stretched out her arm as far as she could, she was able to grab it. “Look! Mommy found the...” She trailed off before she could finish her cheerful exclamation.

Near the foot of the tree, there was a man, standing up straight with one arm behind his back, looking up at her. When their eyes met, he cocked his head in a mischievous way that stood in contrast to his dignified bearing.

It was Matthias. Her mind had gone completely blank, but she was certain of that. As far-fetched as it sounded, she had no doubt. It was him. It couldn't be anyone else.

Holding the balloon in one hand, she continued to stare at him. Her other hand was trembling slightly as she used it to keep her balance on the tree branch. As he gazed up at her with his gleaming blue eyes, a smile slowly spread across his face.

Without saying anything, he moved his left hand from behind his

back. The ends of the white ribbon tied to his wrist fluttered in the soft evening breeze.

It was strange. She had been ardently missing him, thinking about him several times each day. And yet now, she couldn't find any words to say to him. All she could do was bite her lip and stare at him with widened eyes. Also remaining silent, he slowly spread out his arms.

Her memories after that were hazy. She vaguely recalled nimbly descending the tree and running towards him. The tears flowing from her eyes blurred her vision, but she didn't care. As she ran faster and faster towards him, her hair billowed behind her like a pair of golden wings. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but when she opened her lips, all that came out was a cry that sounded even more infantile than that of their son.

She flew into Matthias's arms as lightly as a bird. As she did so, the balloon string slipped from her grip, and the balloon started floating away.

With eyes that looked just like his father's, little Felix gazed at the pretty balloon as it ascended far up into the sky. For a moment, he seemed about to cry, but then his eyes went wide with amazement. In the spot in the sky where the balloon had receded out of sight, a flock of birds was flying by.

As his eyes started sparkling with fascination, he shifted his gaze to his mother and father, who were embracing each other. For a moment, he seemed perplexed, as if he was wondering if he should start crying like his mother was. Instead, he burst into delighted laughter.

As the setting sun infused the sky with a rosy hue, the flock of birds descended and landed on the lake.

*I knew my bird would return,* Layla thought.

It was a wonderful summer evening.

# Epilogue 1

The wedding was set to be held in the late summer.

Everyone was quite surprised to hear that Duke Herhardt had not died in battle, but was alive and back in Berg. However, this surprise was soon replaced by the even greater shock brought by the news of this unprecedented wedding.

The empire's highest-ranking nobleman was marrying a lowly orphan. Furthermore, this orphan was the adopted daughter of an employee who had worked on the duke's estate. And as if that weren't enough, she had previously been engaged to the son of the Herhardts' family doctor. Soon, everyone in high society was discussing the situation with grave concern.

“I heard that the duke was severely injured in the war. Maybe the shock of that experience caused this shift in his behavior. I've heard that things like that are common among wounded soldiers.”

“If that were the case, Dowager and Lady Herhardt would never have approved the wedding. By the way, I heard that the duke and the woman have a baby together. But get this—the baby was born at the end of last year.”

“What?! That means that he must have been having an illicit affair with the woman back when he was still engaged to Claudine, right?”

“That's right. In other words, Matthias von Herhardt is marrying his mistress after fathering an illegitimate child with her. Goodness.”

That summer, one could go to any aristocratic party in the empire and hear people gossiping about that shameful wedding, even while the two people at the center of the scandal stayed out of the public eye.

“This is a betrayal to us all! It's insulting! I will not be attending the wedding. I simply can't accept that lowly woman as a duchess!” one aristocrat said.

Such declarations were commonplace, and they were always met with agreement from the other aristocrats present. The aristocracy already felt threatened by the rapid changes going on in society. A nobleman marrying a commoner could only accelerate this process. And the fact that it was no less than Duke Herhardt committing this affront only made it worse!

However, there were other perspectives to consider. “You know, as absurd as the whole situation is, the fact remains that we're talking about the House of Herhardt. No one can afford to make enemies with that family. They are just too dominant over the Berg business world.”

The companies owned by the Herhardt family were expanding rapidly. The influence of capitalists was steadily replacing that of the old aristocratic order, and it would have been foolhardy for anyone to declare opposition to the family leading the way in that change. Especially considering that this family was seen as the symbol of the old order as well.

While aristocrats were thus divided into two opposed camps, the problematic wedding was fast approaching. The ceremony was going to be held on an evening in the late summer, at Arvis.

Duke Herhardt shocked high society by inviting only close friends and family. Those aristocrats who had planned to shame the Duke Herhardt by refusing to attend his wedding, instead had to settle for denouncing his rude arrogance he was showing by not inviting them.

Meanwhile, the day of the wedding was still approaching.

* * *

After a nervous, nearly sleepless night, Layla stared blankly at Matthias as he lay sleeping next to her. In the light of the morning sun, his scars were even more visible. Besides the gunshot wound on his arm, which she already knew about, there were several other scars on his arms and torso.

When she first saw him in the park, he had looked just the same

as always—his face, posture, and movements were exactly how she remembered them. Because of this, it had come as quite a shock to her when he had first removed his shirt and she saw how much damage his body had incurred in the war. She had burst into tears at the sight. Just looking at the scars had made her feel pain in her own body.

*"Don't cry. Your favorite part is unscathed,"* he had said, smirking, as he pointed at his face.

Too flustered to say anything in response, she had simply punched him instead, knowing full well that she wasn't strong enough for her fists to hurt him.

As she gazed at his scars now in the morning sun, she furtively reached out and felt them. They had faded with time somewhat, but they hadn't disappeared. Despite the scars, he was still handsome and in great physical condition, but she couldn't help feeling bad for him.

Soon, she noticed with a start that he had awoken, and was looking at her. "Does it hurt?" she asked.

"No. You can keep feeling them."

Suddenly feeling bashful, she pulled her hand away from his body and said, "You should go now."

"Go where?" he asked.

"Where do you think? To your room," she replied, frowning, as she gestured in the direction of the door leading to their separate bedrooms.

The previous weekend, they had traveled from Ratse to Arvis, where they would be staying until the wedding. Her joy at being reunited with the beautiful scenery of her childhood was short-lived. Shortly after arriving, she was swarmed by Arvis staff members. From that point on, preparations for the wedding had been filling practically every waking hour of her days.

The staff members were used to thinking of Layla as Mr. Remmer's daughter, so it was hard for them to adjust to treating her as the future Duchess Herhardt. It felt awkward for Layla too. After

a lifetime spent on equal footing with them, suddenly she was supposed to act like their superior? She hated the thought. In fact, she didn't think she would ever get used to it. She couldn't tell this to anyone, however.

From the start, she had been aware that marrying Matthias von Herhardt amounted to more than just becoming one man's wife. But now, facing the incredible amount of responsibility ahead of her, she felt a little overwhelmed.

The previous week was a blur in her memory. Even though she was in the Arvis of her youth, it felt like she was in a completely foreign world. She had to talk differently, think differently, and move differently.

Furthermore, she could no longer spend every moment of the day with her child. After she had mustered up the courage to tell Elise that she wanted to look after Felix herself, her future mother-in-law had scoffed and replied, *“You are a Herhardt now, dear.”*

Layla had well understood the meaning hidden behind that simple remark. She didn't like being told she had to spend time away from her son, but she wasn't going to whine about it. She wanted to do her best to fill her new role, and since she was doing it for the sake of Matthias and their son, she felt like she could.

However, no matter how hard she tried, her feelings of inadequacy only grew. Ultimately, she didn't think she would be able to become the elegant queen of high society that her predecessors, the previous duchesses, had been.

She felt this hopeless feeling most acutely late at night at the end of a long, hectic day, when she was all alone in the duchess’s bedroom, which was almost frightening in its immense size and lavish decor. When she looked at the faces of the noblewomen whose portraits were hanging on the walls, she felt like they were glaring back at her with looks of reproach. She knew that she would have felt much better if she could be holding Felix in her arms, feeling his warmth and smelling his soft scent.

As the night wore on, she remained too anxious and frightened to

sleep. Then, all of a sudden, she heard a sound. Looking in its direction, she almost fainted with surprise at the sight of a secret door opening. It was only when Matthias appeared in the doorway that she learned that there was a secret passageway connecting the duke's and duchess's bedrooms.

This was forbidden behavior. Elise and Katharina had made that quite clear to them. After summoning them to have a talk, they had expressed that, even though the couple was getting married after having a child out of wedlock, there were still certain rules of propriety that they would have to follow. Basically, until the wedding, they were to keep their distance from each other. Despite having been at that meeting right next to Layla, Matthias had not hesitated in coming to find her that night. And she hadn't turned him away.

She felt at ease when she was with him. It was a similar feeling to the one she got when she was holding Felix, with the added bonus that he was much bigger than their son and was capable of holding her as well.

As the sun continued to rise, she said with more urgency, “You should go. What if we get caught?”

Lying on his side with his head leaning on his hand, he smirked at her. He found it cute that she was still acting like they were having a secret affair. He decided not to disabuse her of that notion.

“Layla,” he whispered, still sounding groggy.

She could feel herself blushing immediately. Somehow, despite all the intimate things they had done together, just hearing him whisper her name was making her feel embarrassed.

“Smile for me,” he said, as he loosely twirled a lock of her hair around his finger.

After thinking for a moment, she gently frowned and replied, “I don't like taking orders.”

“You won't give me as simple a gift as a smile?”

“Why should I?”

“Well, because it's my wedding day.”

At this casual reply, she gasped. After staring intently at him for a moment, she looked nervously around the room, and then looked at him again, seeming as if she was about to cry. “I feel a little scared.”

“What are you scared of?”

“I'm scared that... maybe I don't have it in me to become a real duchess. I'm going to study and practice and work as hard as I can... but what if I still can't manage it? What if I become a burden to you and our son?”

“That won't happen, Layla,” he said, remaining utterly calm in the face of her uneasiness.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I won't let it happen.” He then bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. There was not the slightest hint of hesitation or fear on his face.

She gazed at him for a moment, then broke down and smiled.

He was still an enigma to her. When he kept his promise and returned, she was extremely happy and moved. However, she also felt deeply hurt by him for intentionally hiding the fact that he was alive. Especially considering that he did so for two entire seasons. Then again, she knew that he had done it all for her sake, so she couldn't stay angry at him.

As always, there was no sign of guilt or regret on his face. It was hard to see him as a good person when he showed such willingness to do whatever was necessary to achieve his ends, even going as far as to fake his own death. She didn't fully understand his methods, particularly with regards to how he treated her. Nonetheless, she was willing to accept him.

When she ran into his open arms at the park after he returned, she embraced not only him, but all the pain and sadness of the past, as well as all the chaos of the days ahead. She loved him. Nothing was more important than that.

He cupped her cheek with his hand and whispered, “Again.”

Once again, she reluctantly smiled, this time while looking into

his eyes. If a smile was the gift he wanted, she was willing to give it to him. After all, as he said, it was his wedding day.

They exchanged sweet looks, smiles, and kisses, first innocently, then with increasing passion. The morning sun continued to rise, but their bodies remained entangled like lovers in the middle of the night.

Before leaving the duchess's bedroom, he said, “I have a gift for you, too.” He walked back to the foot of the bed and stooped down to kiss her forehead. Then he whispered, “You can look forward to it.”

# Epilogue 2

It didn't take long for Felix von Herhardt to win the hearts of his grandmother and great-grandmother. The very first day that Matthias brought Layla and Felix to the Ratse mansion, Elise and Katharina fell in love with him. He looked just like his father had looked at that age. The resemblance was so striking, the former duchesses couldn't help but burst into astonished laughter. There was no way they could reject Felix when he was so clearly a Herhardt.

“It's what's best for the child, Elise,” Dowager Herhardt warmly said, l, trying to console her upset daughter-in-law.

“Yes, you're right,” Lady Herhardt reluctantly replied. Her mother-in-law's words had done little to soothe her heart, but when she looked at Felix's smiling face as he lay in his great-grandmother's arms, she felt much better.

Matthias had informed them of his intention to start living in Ratse. Moving the family business to the capital would allow him to expand its operations even more. As insistent as he was on framing the move as a business innovation to keep up with the changing times, everyone knew the real reason. As awkward as the situation was, it was hard to oppose.

Layla was never going to be able to become the new queen of high society. The role was simply incompatible with her nature. If she had even the slightest shred of vanity inside her, that would have been enough to build on. However, as much as it perplexed Elise and Katharina, she seemed completely innocent, devoid of any vanity whatsoever.

Of course, she was quite intelligent and an excellent student, so she would be able to learn and carry out whatever rules of etiquette and decorum they threw at her. However, that alone wasn't enough for her to be able to fill the role of duchess. No matter how much she practiced and how hard she tried to behave like a duchess,

there was a difference between those who had to try to behave like an aristocrat, and those for whom it came naturally. Those in high society would immediately sniff her out as a member of the former category, and they would criticize her to no end.

As former duchesses themselves, Elise and Katharina thus knew exactly what the future had in store for the next Duchess Herhardt. Layla could put forth endless effort, but the noblewomen of high society would never accept her as part of their world. Matthias had already anticipated this, and had decided to avoid an unpleasant situation by making the first move. Rather than letting Layla be rejected by high society, she was going to reject high society itself.

This wasn't a simple retreat, however. He understood the way the aristocratic mind worked well enough to know that those in high society looked down on those who tried to curry favor with them, while they respected and even envied those who ignored them.

The only question was whether the House of Herhardt would be able to maintain its supreme position in the empire without a duchess presiding over social events. However, Matthias showed no concern over this.

*"Then you'll have to spend your life flying with only one wing. Are you sure you can handle it?"* Katharina had asked.

Without hesitating, Matthias had replied, *"Yes, Grandmother."* After gazing out the window at the sky for a moment, he smiled and turned to face the former duchesses again. *"I will see to it that in the new era, the Herhardt name will be even more highly regarded than before."*

The former duchesses could detect neither overconfidence nor childish enthusiasm in his statement. He simply seemed to be stating a fact, and this went a long way in convincing them. However, they still didn't understand his decision to let his wife go to college.

After staring at her grandson for a moment, Elise started grinning slyly and turned to her son. "Well, at least we'll have Felix, so it's not a losing deal for us, either."

In exchange for their respecting the life in Ratse that the newlyweds would be leading, the former duchesses had proposed a deal. The condition they had pushed for was that Felix would spend one season out of each year at Arvis.

Elise believed that no matter how much the world changed, there were certain values that should be preserved forever. Arvis was imbued with these values, and she wanted the next Duke Herhardt to become a nobleman who knew these values. Katharina felt the same way.

*"Yes, that's fine,"* Matthias had replied, even though he thought their demand was a bit excessive.

His attitude was so coolheaded, they almost wondered if he understood that they were separating him from his own child.

Upon reflection, they realized that in contrast to the ardent attachment he showed towards Layla, he seemed more indifferent towards his son. However, as long as he wasn't neglecting his duties, they didn't consider this a problem. After all, he had always been an aloof person. His behavior towards Layla was the exception, not the rule.

Elise gazed for a moment at the platform where the wedding ceremony was going to be held. Then, furrowing her brow, she turned to Matthias and asked, "Does Layla know about this?

Despite all the qualities that Layla was lacking as a daughter-in-law, Elise acknowledged that she was not cunning or sneaky. In fact, just yesterday she had been trying her hardest to prepare for life as a duchess living at Arvis. Thus, Elise couldn't help but wonder if Matthias had made the decision on his own.

Her suspicion was cut short, however, by the announcement that the wedding guests were starting to arrive.

The garden looked wonderful on this clear summer day. Once the handsome groom and the beautiful bride were standing on the platform, it would look as perfect as a painting.

* * *

While only a small number of people were invited to the wedding, rumors about the wedding spread to every corner of Berg's high society.

Since everyone already knew about the Herhardt family, the primary focus of the rumors was the new duchess, Layla von Herhardt. The consensus was that, whatever other faults she might have, her looks were beyond reproach, and most importantly, she and Matthias made an outstanding pair.

Details of the ceremony were also shared widely—Arvis's beautiful garden filled with wonderful floral scents, the moving ceremony, and the kiss that the bride and groom shared amid the rosy light of the sunset. Gossip circles became especially fixated on the way Duke Herhardt seemed to treasure his petite bride above all else.

What could it be about that woman that had so transformed the normally aloof Matthias von Herhardt?

Desperate to find out the solution to this mystery, aristocrats across Berg eagerly awaited their invitations to the new duchess's debut party at Arvis. However, even as summer gave way to autumn, these invitations never came. What came instead was yet another piece of shocking news that turned their world upside down.

The duke and duchess were going to be living not in Arvis, but in Ratse. Furthermore, they were not going to be going on a honeymoon. This was because the duchess had to start college in the autumn.

The rumors that Duke Herhardt was wild about his wife were clearly true. And even as he maintained his cold, dignified public persona, Matthias made it clear that he had no intention of dispelling such rumors.

* * *

Layla stepped out of the biology building, clutching a textbook in her arms. She could feel the gazes on her of all the students walking

by, but she didn't mind. It had been like this ever since she had begun classes, so it was nothing new.

Word had spread quickly that Duchess Herhardt was majoring in biology. For a while, the halls of the biology building were crowded with people hoping to catch a glimpse of her going to and from lectures. Luckily, this kind of attention had died down by her second semester.

Even after several months as a duchess, that grandiose title still felt alien to her. Perhaps it always would. At the very least, however, she didn't feel overwhelmed by it anymore.

All she had to do was think of Felix, and she felt capable of anything.

When she saw a group of male students openly staring at her, she stopped walking for a moment. They were young noblemen that she had met at a banquet she had recently attended with Matthias. In contrast to the kindness they had displayed that evening, they were now looking at her with contemptuous hostility, but this was nothing new either.

She straightened her posture and slowed her breathing. Her anxiousness was making her grip her textbook more tightly, but it didn't show. With a slight smile, she nodded to the group. She tried to do it in the same coldly elegant way that Matthias would have. It wasn't perfect, but she felt like she did a fairly good job. She then walked on, leaving the group reeling from her unexpected reaction.

Her class got out early today, so she was going to the park with Felix for the first time in a while. Her steps grew lighter and quicker as she approached the fountain where she was going to meet Felix and his nanny.

Felix had already said his first word and taken his first steps. He was growing more adorable by the day. To everyone's amazement, his resemblance to his father seemed to be increasing as well.

People had started calling him “Friendly Matthias” as a joke, but Layla fully agreed with the sentiment. His appearance was exactly like his father's, but his personality was the complete opposite.

*“What a stroke of luck that is,”* Elise had recently said about this.

Hearing her mother-in-law rejoice over the difference between Matthias and Felix's personalities had made Layla flinch. Especially considering that Matthias was standing right next to her. However, he hadn't seemed to mind at all.

“Mama!!” Felix shouted excitedly from the nanny's arms as soon as he saw his approaching mother.

Layla smiled and waved back at him for a moment, and then her eyes went wide. To her surprise, next to Felix and the nanny was Matthias. Sitting on the edge of the fountain, looking up at the sky, he slowly lowered his gaze to look at her. When their eyes met, he smiled and stood up.

Feeling a little bewildered, she ran towards the identical-looking father and son. After deftly putting down the textbook and taking the baby from the nanny, she asked, “What's going on? Didn't you say you had an important meeting today?”

As she stood smiling at Matthias, the baby in her arms had an identical smile on his face.

“It ended early,” Matthias replied. He then reached out to receive Felix from Layla.

Felix seemed just as comfortable in his father's arms as in his mother's.

“Then can you go with us?” Layla asked, her eyes full of cautious anticipation.

Since the wedding, Matthias had become even more busy than usual. Throughout the autumn and winter, she had only been able to see him in the early morning or late at night. Now that he was in the final stages of moving his business to Ratse, he would get the occasional bit of free time, but he had never shown up out of the blue like this. Thus Layla was quite surprised to see him here.

“What do I get if I go with you?” he asked, smirking.

The mischievous look on his face reminded her of what he had been like as a boy, back when she had first found her way to Arvis. Back then, she had found him frightening, but also so handsome

that she couldn't take her eyes off him.

“If you go with us... I'll buy you an ice cream,” she muttered, averting her eyes.

Sometimes it felt strange to her, living this peaceful new life as part of the Herhardt family.

Matthias could have said anything in response to her ice cream, but instead he just remained silent. Feeling embarrassed, she tapped her foot and furrowed her brow. Then she heard a soft laugh. Looking up, she saw two pairs of blue eyes looking at her.

“Fine,” Matthias said, taking her by the hand. “Let's go.”

He smiled, and in his arms Felix burst into innocent laughter. Looking at the two matching faces, Layla started smiling as well.

She squeezed Matthias's hand and they started walking together. The spring day was bright and beautiful.

# Epilogue 3

Claudine stood in front of the gravestone, gazing down at the name as it shimmered in the afternoon sun: *Riette von Lindman.* Her blue eyes were as still as deep pools as they took in that name, which was now a relic of the past.

The shadows of the trees around the grave slowly grew in length. Claudine remained motionless. Her pale face, half visible beneath the wide brim of her hat, showed no particular expression.

The countless thoughts that had been swimming in her head as she traveled here all went silent when she reached the gravesite. All that was left now was a feeling of tired emptiness.

She thought she could hear his voice amid the rustling of the leaves, saying, *"I love you..."*

Then she thought she could see his eyes gazing warmly at her amid the sunshine while he passionately said, *"We can run away together..."*

However, even as she was fantasizing about these moments from the past, she knew that were she to be returned to that time, there was still only one response that she could give.

The regrets that lingered in her heart were about very minor things. Whenever he had come to visit her at home and was leaving, she would always stand outside the front door, watching until he was out of sight. However, she never once waved goodbye, and this brought her regret. She regretted not smiling and laughing more for him. She regretted not bidding him farewell the last time they saw each other.

*Why did you love me so much, when I couldn't even do such simple things for you?* she wondered.

Knowing that she would never know the answer to that question, she placed the rose bouquet she was holding on the grave. The feathers and ribbons adorning her hat fluttered as she moved.

"Goodbye," she said, smiling faintly as she delivered this belated

farewell. “Goodbye, my love,” she added in a whisper, knowing that these words meant nothing now.

That was the end. Immediately afterwards, she turned indifferently away from the grave and started walking back to the car, not looking back once. Her eyes were a little red, but the shade from the brim of her hat hid this. The car headed back into the city at once.

This evening her fiancé was coming to visit the Brandt mansion. He was a tycoon from the New World. He lacked an aristocratic title, but he had a fortune that rivaled that of the Herhardt family. In the past, Count and Countess Brandt would never have considered a commoner, even a wealthy one, as a marriage candidate for their daughter. Since the war, however, the world was a changed place, and the old ways no longer held sway. The count and countess had grasped this fact quickly, and thus had readily accepted the man as their daughter's new fiancé. Claudine felt the same way.

Berg high society was still abuzz with gossip about how Duke Herhardt, after being thought dead for half a year, had returned home and married his mistress, who had borne his child out of wedlock. As the primary victim of this unsavory marriage, Claudine herself was a frequent topic of gossip as well. Not everyone felt sympathy towards her. There were many who were rejoicing over the fact that Claudine von Brandt's fiancé had been snatched away by a lowly commoner woman. However, Claudine knew that the whole thing would blow over soon enough.

As she gazed out the car window at the pretty scenery flowing by, her eyes were as calm as usual.

The wedding was scheduled for this summer, in her fiancé's home country across the sea. Preparations were almost complete. All that remained now was for her to board the ship with him.

The car came to a stop in front of a hotel on a street lined with high-end shops. She was meeting her mother here for a social gathering, and then the two of them would return to the House of

Brandt.

“Um, Miss Claudine?” her maid said after a moment, noticing that Claudine wasn't moving.

Claudine then adjusted her hat and elegantly exited the car. She was bathed in the light from the ornate chandelier as she entered the hotel lobby.

The world of high society, full of its elaborate, luxurious decor, was still beautiful to her. She still loved this world. It was the only world she felt at home in, and that would never change.

She stopped for a moment, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Then she slowly exhaled, opened her eyes again, and continued walking into that dazzling, beautiful world.

* * *

The Herhardt family car left the Ratse University campus and went to the park. As they walked through the park with its spring flowers in full bloom, the three Herhardts looked like an ordinary family—a loving husband and wife, and their adorable child. They resembled a family at the end of a fairytale, living happily ever after.

Mark Evers, who knew what Duke Herhardt had been up to this morning, felt a little strange as he looked on. Since moving to Ratse, the duke had been devoting most of his energy to his role as a businessman. He was technically fulfilling his duties as a duke by attending only those social events that he absolutely had to. Beyond those, however, he seemed to have shunned high society entirely.

Other aristocrats viewed this as an affront, and their resentment was growing steadily. However, no one with the least bit of sense would dare defy Duke Herhardt directly. Instead, the embittered aristocrats were targeting what they saw as his weak spot—his wife and son, who were not recognized by aristocratic society.

For a while now, ignoring and ridiculing those two had been something of a pastime for the spiteful nobles. So far, the duke hadn't done much to stop this, so it had gradually grown in severity.

But Mark foresaw the trend stopping once word spread about what had happened today.

Count Stein, along with his wife, had taken the lead among Berg nobles in ostracizing the duke's wife and son, saying that the former was still nothing but a lowly mistress, while calling the latter a bastard with commoner's blood flowing through his veins. And today, the House of Stein had declared bankruptcy. The tobacco company that was the Stein family's main source of income had been foundering for a while, and their other businesses were collapsing one after another. Today's meeting had finalized the Herhardt company's acquisition of the tobacco company.

The duke had made the decision without the slightest deliberation, making no attempt to hide his reasons. This was how he typically behaved in matters related to the duchess. However, it seemed that his outspokenness was preventing such actions from harming his reputation.

After giving instructions on how to proceed with a few pieces of company business, he returned to his family. As he took a lick of the ice cream cone that the duchess was holding out towards him, there was no sign in his face of the coldhearted businessman from earlier.

Ultimately, Mark could only laugh. After gazing at the family for a moment longer, he stepped away to carry out the duke's orders. It was a beautiful spring afternoon. He decided to focus only on that.

* * *

The family sat in the shade of a tree covered with pale-pink blossoms. Layla was leaning against the tree's trunk, while Matthias was lying on his back with his head in her lap. Felix was toddling around them, laughing delightedly at regular intervals.

“Are you tired?” Layla asked, noticing that her husband's eyes were closed.

“Yeah.”

“Because you've been so busy lately?”

“Maybe.”

“What were you busy with today?”

With his eyes still closed, he grinned. “Oh, just this and that.”

He hadn't intended to go to such extreme measures. He had been willing to show Count and Countess Stein mercy, if they had only taken the opportunity he had extended to them the last time he saw them, at the banquet he had attended with Layla.

The count and countess had shown open contempt towards his wife and son in the past, and that evening their attitude was no different. Following Countess Stein's lead, the noblewomen at the banquet had shown their hostility towards Layla by openly ignoring her, not even returning her greeting when she arrived. Of course, they had tried to avoid Duke Herhardt's attention as they denigrated Layla among themselves, but their efforts were futile. This was because Matthias always paid attention to anything concerning his wife.

After dinner that evening, while the men were gathered among themselves in the cigar room, Matthias approached Count Stein and struck up a conversation.

*“I hear that this cigar was made by your family business,”* he said, inspecting the cigar that he was holding loosely between his fingers. *“It seems every bit as distinguished as your bloodline.”*

*“Just what are you getting at?”* Count Stein replied in a defensive tone, furrowing his brow.

*“Oh, nothing really,”* Matthias replied, before casually taking a drag of the cigar and then slowly exhaling the smoke. *“I just wanted to compliment this fine cigar. In fact, it's such a good cigar, it almost makes me want to acquire your tobacco company. But I don't know... Could a family with a mixed bloodline like mine ever make a cigar as fine as this one?”*

*“What on earth are you-”*

*“Oh, I'd just like to be able to possess this smooth, purebred taste for myself.”* Matthias sighed ruefully, then took another long drag of the cigar and slowly exhaled it.

Count Stein went stiff, looking at Matthias with a bewildered expression, before asking, *"Are you threatening me right now because of your wife?"*

*"My, you're certainly a quick one,"* Matthias replied, smiling, as he leaned against the wood-paneled wall.

Startled by the duke's unexpected reply, Count Stein went pale in the face and took a step back.

*"But I'm not just joking around here, Count Stein. The more that we talk, the more I feel sincerely interested in your little tobacco company."*

*"Duke Herhardt, surely you understand the importance of keeping business concerns separate from petty social gossip?"*

*"I do, but then again, if you're perfect all the time, you run the risk of losing your humanity."* Flicking the ash off the end of his cigar, he took a step towards Count Stein, closing the gap between them. *"After all, sometimes a flaw can become a strength."*

*"Look here, Duke Herhardt, I don't know wh-"*

*"You seem unaware of this, but when it comes to my wife, I am brimming with humanity, Count Stein."* Snickering, he tossed the half-smoked cigar into the ashtray. *"Oh well. Everyone makes mistakes."*

He slowly shifted his gaze to the adjoining room, where the noblewomen were gathered in pairs. Countess Stein and her friends appeared to be treating Layla in the same coldhearted way as always. *"I expect that you'll handle this matter appropriately, Count Stein."* He then nodded to the red-faced Count Stein and left the cigar room.

After that, he waited for an apology from the count and countess. However, far from apologizing, the couple instead doubled down on their vicious slandering of Layla and Felix, thus bringing on their own tragic demise.

"What sort of 'this and that' were you up to?"

He opened his eyes and saw his wife's face full of curiosity. He snickered and closed his eyes again to evade the question. He saw no reason why she needed to know about Stein's bankruptcy.

"You're not sick, are you?"

“No, I'm not.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I'm glad. Then you should get some rest.” She caressed his cheek.

His eyes were a little sore, but he wasn't drowsy. Nonetheless, he nodded obediently. His tenderhearted wife showed extra affectionate towards him whenever he displayed the slightest sign of pain or fatigue. By now, he had figured out how to use this quality of hers to his own advantage.

Sometimes the war wounds on his body were useful for this as well. When he let her see them, she would often grow so distressed with sympathy that she would gently caress and kiss them. He liked this. He also liked the way she would stick close by him, fretfully asking if he was all right. In such moments, he felt like he was her whole world. He loved the little world the two of them made together.

“You'd better not get sick,” she whispered. Her voice tickled his ear.

Her hand moved from his cheek to his hair, which she started slowly running her fingers through. They remained in this intimate state for a long while, until she was finally pulled away by the sound of their son crying. She rolled up her shawl into a makeshift pillow and placed it underneath Matthias's head after sliding her legs free. Then she ran towards the crying toddler.

Matthias half-opened his eyes and turned his head.

# Epilogue 4

It seemed that Felix had toppled over. Judging from the unconcerned expression on Layla's face, however, he didn't seem to be hurt.

As Matthias watched his son, who looked so much like Matthias himself, holding on so tightly to his mother's neck, he couldn't help but laugh.

At first, he had had no idea how to treat his son. During the war, when Felix was still a fetus in its mother's womb, Matthias had been ready to sacrifice it in order to save her life. Thus, when he had first seen little Felix in the flesh, it had felt a little surreal.

However, it didn't take long for him to fall in love. All it took was for him to see that Felix's smile looked just like Layla's. Felix looked like his father, but in every other way, he took after his mother. Matthias liked that about him.

Layla returned to the tree with the baby, and Matthias sat up, so that he could more actively participate in the family time that he knew she cherished. She loved seeing him play with Felix. It always made her smile delightedly. And this smile, in turn, made him love Felix even more.

Still holding Felix in her arms, she turned to Matthias and excitedly said, “I'm going to make you a delicious dinner tonight.”

He nodded eagerly. Even now that she was a duchess, she still cooked from time to time, mainly when there was a particular dish that she wanted to make for Matthias or Felix. This had shocked the Ratse mansion's butler, who had expressed his concern to Matthias, but Matthias had paid him no mind.

He didn't want Layla to feel trapped inside the traditional roles assigned to a duchess. He had felt this most acutely during the time they spent at Arvis preparing for the wedding. He didn't like seeing her struggling to fulfill the burdensome role of duchess. It was like seeing someone wearing an ill-fitting outfit.

She had done so much for him. She had taken him back after they had parted, and not only that, she loved him and had forgiven him for everything. Thus, he intended to make her life into a beautiful paradise in which she was free to behave as she wished. He loved seeing her thrive in that paradise.

On the way home, she suddenly said, “Oh! We have to go to the imperial palace next week, right?”

The empress's birthday party was fast approaching.

“Don't worry, Layla,” he said, as he gently swept her hair back after the spring breeze had blown it into her face. “Everyone will be nice.”

*By next week, everyone will have heard about what happened to Stein,* he thought. However, rather than adding this explanation, he simply smiled.

Layla rarely spoke of the contemptuous way that most aristocrats treated her. She was too proud to complain about such things to her husband. Despite her attempts to keep it all to herself, however, Matthias was fully aware of the situation. And unlike his wife, he had no intention of letting it slide.

He had been telling the truth when he said that he didn't care whether the aristocratic world changed with the times or not. If this meant that Layla would get hurt, however, it was a different story. In that case, if the aristocratic world didn't change on its own, he was going to change it himself. If that meant he needed to amass more power for the House of Herhardt, he was ready to do that. It wouldn't be hard for him.

With the exception of Layla Llewellyn, or as she was now known, Layla von Herhardt, there had been few significant challenges in his life, and he expected things to stay this way.

“Yes, I'm sure you're right. I'll do my best to make a good impression on everyone,” she said. There was a look of suspicion in her eyes, but she seemed not to want to spoil the mood by pressing him.

Meanwhile, the car came to a stop in front of the Ratse mansion.

Matthias picked up their sleeping son himself and exited the car. Layla seemed delighted to see him taking an active role with the child. She practically skipped with joy as they walked to the mansion's entrance together. *Family*—his beautiful wife loved that word to no end. And everything that she loved, he loved as well.

The three-person family stepped into the mansion's main hall. Like a songbird singing a pretty song, Layla started listing the dishes she was going to prepare for dinner, and Matthias listened intently.

It was a beautiful spring day.

* * *

After worrying about it for weeks, Layla found the empress's birthday party to be a much easier experience than she had expected. Matthias's assurance that everyone would be nice had come true! Most of the noblewomen who at previous events had shown open contempt for her were now simply ignoring her, and a few of them even greeted or chatted with her.

In the car on the way back home after the party, she asked, “Did you know something I didn't?”

Matthias looked quizzically back at her, pretending not to know what she was talking about.

“You told me not to worry, remember? You said that everyone would be nice,” she reminded him.

“Oh, that,” he said, chuckling. “No, I didn't know anything you didn't. I was just trying to give you some reassurance.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I don't know, it's just that everything really did turn out that way. Everyone was nice, just like you said.”

“I'm glad to hear it.”

His easygoing reaction cleared her mind of all doubt.

* * *

It was the height of spring in Ratse. The warm seasons came a little earlier there than they did in Karlsbar, and the streets were already full of the scent of roses.

That weekend, Matthias and Layla were going on their first outing without Felix in quite a while. This was possible thanks to the fact that Felix's grandmother and great-grandmother were staying in Ratse, and had insisted on having Felix to themselves for a while.

“Matthias, I didn't expect you'd be so stingy with your wife,” Elise said, narrowing her eyes, as she looked at the couple standing side by side.

Her eyes were on Layla, specifically on the emerald necklace around her neck. Layla flinched as she realized the meaning behind that reproachful look.

“She's always wearing the same necklace, Matthias,” Elise continued. “I worry that Duchess Herhardt will be criticized for not having appropriate jewelry.”

“I picked that necklace, Mother,” he replied, maintaining a calm, polite tone of voice.

“Emeralds bring out her natural beauty more than any other gem.”

Elise seemed unsatisfied by this response, but after a moment she let out a resigned sigh. By now she was well aware that her son became a different person whenever Layla's name was mentioned. This no longer made her feel angry or sad, just a little frustrated.

The couple finished bidding farewell and headed out of the mansion. Instead of taking the car, they walked down the sunny street, hand in hand. After wandering around for a while, they proceeded on to the natural history museum. Matthias listened intently as Layla excitedly showered him with her knowledge about all the items on exhibit. She knew he wasn't really interested in the things she was telling him, but this only made her appreciate it all the more that he was feigning interest.

As they walked down a sunny hallway between exhibit halls, she

uncrossed her arms and took her husband by the hand, saying, “Thanks, by the way.”

“Thanks for what?” he asked, squeezing her hand.

“For defending Uncle Bill's necklace. I think that your mother really believed that you picked it out,” she replied, looking down at the pearls and emeralds sparkling beautifully on her necklace.

He saw that her eyes were full of longing, so he decided not to tell her that he really was the one who had picked it out. He planned to keep the truth of this from her forever. Not because he wanted to deceive her, but because he wanted to protect her feelings.

“I really appreciated it,” she said, smiling faintly. At that moment, her eyes were shining with a rich green hue, like a summer forest.

He smiled back at her, saying nothing.

On their wedding day, just as the ceremony was coming to an end, he had looked at her amid the rosy light of the sunset and said, *“I'm going to be your heaven, your sky. So please, fly freely. As long as you don't leave me, you can do anything you want. I love you.”*

Later that night, after the reception, she had discovered what he meant by that. The news that they would be living not in Arvis but in Ratse was surprising enough, but it came as a real shock to her when he told her that she was going to start attending Ratse University in just a few weeks.

*“You got the university to accept my enrollment without me having to retake the entrance exam? How did you manage that?”* she asked, in a daze.

*“For you, I can do anything, Layla,”* he casually replied.

She sometimes found it irritating the way he was always making decisions without consulting her, but she knew why he did it. It was because he wanted to restore her wings after having clipped them. In other words, it was because he loved her.

Of course, it was especially baffling that he had used their son as a bargaining chip in this process. For a while, she had worried that

Matthias hated his own son. Now, however, it was clear to her that he loved Felix. As hard as it was to believe, it was undeniable. He was an outstanding husband and father. She now saw him this way. The hate she had once felt towards him was gone from her heart. In its place was a calm peacefulness, as pure as the spring sunlight.

After visiting a few more exhibits, they walked back out onto the street, still holding hands. As they walked, she did most of the talking. Meanwhile, he quietly enjoyed the sight of her rosy cheeks and pretty lips as he listened to her talk about various subjects—the classes she was finding most interesting, and the ones she was finding most challenging; the new words that Felix had learned; the new curtains that she had hung in the bedroom; her plans for summer vacation. The triviality of all these subjects only made him happier to hear about them.

He gazed at her intently. As she briefly closed her eyes in thought and opened them again, the shadows of her eyelashes fluttered like the wings of a butterfly. When she then resumed speaking, her eyes glinted in the sunlight, as if they were full of an eternal summer. He had wanted so fervently to possess her, he had been willing to do whatever it took, even forcefully abducting her and threatening her. In the end, none of that had made him feel like he truly possessed her, however. His twisted desire for her had destroyed him, but now he had risen from the ashes. And now, they both loved each other. Now he truly felt like she was his.

They had spent some time far apart from each other, but now, they were finally back together, holding hands, feeling neither hate nor sadness but only love as they started their life afresh. They were walking together not just as lovers, not just as husband and wife, but as family.

Suddenly, she stopped walking and, looking up at him, said, “Oh, by the way.” Her eyes twinkled through the thin, gold frames of her glasses. “Is there anything you want from me?”

“Want from you?”

“Yeah. We're always doing things I want to do.”

“Hmm...” He looked up at the sky as if in contemplation, then instantly looked down at her again. “Nope. I've got everything I want.”

It was really true. She had been the one and only desire in his life. Now that they were together, he was satisfied.

“How does that make me look?” she replied. “Now I feel like I want too many things. Am I too greedy?”

He smiled. “No. You can be as greedy as you like.” He gently caressed her rosy cheek. “I don't mind.”

He liked it when she expressed desire for things. He liked that he was able to satisfy these desires for her. Outside of that, there was nothing that he wanted for himself. He already felt like he was king of the world when she looked at him with her clear, gentle gaze.

Still feeling a little embarrassed, she turned away from him and started walking faster. However, he was able to keep pace with her without exerting much effort.

Sometimes she felt frightened thinking about their love. Their hearts had been in conflict for so long. Would they ever be able to achieve true love together? However, whenever they spent time together like today, her worries melted away. Now she felt secure around him. She knew that in his presence, she could cry as much as she wanted, get as angry as she wanted, be as greedy as she wanted, and he would always stay by her side. After all, when she had waited for him, he had returned to her. She was confident now that, as long as she had him, she would never be alone.

She came to a stop in the beautiful light of the park's walking path. “Still, try to think of something.” She looked up at him with determination in her eyes. “Even the lofty Duke Herhardt must want *something*.”

In the face of her earnest question, he simply smiled and shook his head.

“Nothing, really?” she asked incredulously. Just then, a young couple walked past with their daughter. Layla's eyes perked up. Turning back to Matthias, she asked, “What about... a daughter?”

She could feel herself blushing as she asked this, but she kept looking straight at him.

"A daughter?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Yes! Remember, back when you were giving names for the baby, you said you wanted a daughter, right?"

"Oh, that," he said, snickering. "You said that you wouldn't be able to live without the baby, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"That was why I said that."

"What do you mean?"

"If I had died in battle and you had borne a son, the House of Herhardt might have taken him away from you."

"That was why you hoped it was a girl?"

"Yes. Contrary to my wishes, it was a boy. Luckily, though, I did make it back to you alive, so it didn't matter. I don't need a daughter. Little Felix is all I need."

She cocked her head, taken aback by his response. "Still, though, think how wonderful it would be to have a daughter. She'd probably look just like me."

A daughter that looked just like Layla? His eyes filled with interest at the thought. He was curious what Layla had been like as a young child. The thought of being able to give that lonely little girl all the love and attention that she deserved was appealing. Since he couldn't go back in time, it seemed like a decent alternative for Layla to bear a daughter that he could love as much as he loved Layla. However, the more he thought about it, the more he knew that, no matter how much a daughter might resemble Layla, she wouldn't really be Layla.

Clearing the fantasy from his mind, he looked again at Layla, his little bird, and solemnly asked, "Why would I need a daughter that looked like you, when I have the real you?"

*Yes, I already have you,* he thought, as he gazed at her for a long while. She was still his one and only desire in life, and he was sure this would remain true until his dying day. As she looked at him

with a bewildered expression on her face, he gently kissed her cheek, then smiled.

She gazed back at him with tears in her stunned eyes. She tried to back away, but he was holding her cheek firmly in his hand.

His response seemed strange to her, but she didn't dislike it. Soon she realized that it was just another way of telling her that he loved her.

Matthias let go of her cheek and took a step back.

Layla extended her hand toward him. “Hold my hand,” she said, looking straight into his eyes. “Right now,” she added.

Matthias chuckled at her words. Then, his large, strong hand enveloped hers. As their fingers interlocked, he could feel her squeezing back gently.

Hand in hand, they continued their leisurely walk through the rose-scented park. She talked more than usual, and he laughed more than usual. It was an ordinary afternoon, made all the more special by its ordinariness. It was the height of spring, and their love was at its height as well. After that day, many more springs would come and go, but their love would endure forever.

**—The End—**

# Side Story 1:
## Bird of Paradise (1)

The door to the study remained firmly shut late into the night.

Matthias narrowed his eyes as he saw the light seeping out through the crack under the door. For several nights in a row, the duchess had been staying up until the early morning, studying. This pattern would likely continue until she was done with her final exams.

He knocked gently at the door, and then slowly opened it. Layla was asleep at her desk. Her glasses were still on, which suggested that she had not meant to fall asleep.

He gazed at her for a short while, then slowly approached her. As he got closer, he snickered as he noticed the pen that was still firmly gripped in her tiny hand.

Leaning against the desk, he looked down at his peacefully sleeping wife and wondered if he should wake her.

It was a serene, early-summer night. A breeze wafted in through the open window, infusing the study with the faint smell of roses.

Rather than calling out to her, he decided to caress her golden hair, which was fluttering in the breeze. She soon stirred, and after a moment blinked open her eyes.

“Hi, Layla,” he whispered, stooping down closer to her.

She rubbed her bleary eyes under her glasses for a moment. Once her eyes had regained their focus, she sat up with a start, then hurriedly fixed her glasses and straightened her blouse.

“I was just resting my eyes,” she explained.

Matthias just smiled, saying nothing in response.

“I really was...” she muttered, lowering her eyes. She could feel her fingers trembling as she touched her faintly blushing cheeks. She couldn't believe that she was feeling so flustered in front of the duke, when they had been married for almost a year. She put her disheveled hair into a ponytail before looking at him again.

He was quietly gazing out the window at the night sky. With nothing but the desk lamp illuminating the room, it was dim, but she could still sense his presence vividly. As she reflected on this, she realized that it had always been that way with him. Ever since the summer day all those years ago when she had first encountered him, he had stood out distinctly in her awareness. She hadn't always liked this, but it had always been true.

Suddenly he turned his head towards her and their eyes met. She flinched, then said, “Matty?”

He nodded in response, while a slightly mischievous grin lingered on his lips.

“Would you mind leaving me alone?” she asked.

“Why? So you can go back to sleep?”

“No!” she replied, shaking her head. Just then, she noticed the large ink stain on her notes. She tried her best to hide her embarrassment over this. “I'm going to keep studying.”

“Oh, are you?”

“Yes!” she insisted, conspicuously flipping through the pages of the textbook to show that she was serious.

She felt his soft lips against her cheek, and then she heard his equally soft laughter resonating through the dim room.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Study.”

“How am I supposed to do that with you here?”

“Don't mind me. I won't distract you. I'll be quiet,” he brazenly replied, his face still close to hers. He tilted his head slightly, and his bangs brushed against her cheek, tickling her.

She tried to stay calm, but she knew it would be impossible to get any studying done with him next to her like this. Even Felix would have been less distracting. Rather than saying this, she just frowned, and tried to ignore the burning feeling in her flushed cheeks. “Get out of here, please. I really have to study.”

“I thought you were the top student in the class. Shouldn't you have studied for the exam in advance?”

“Obviously I did!” she shouted. As soon as the words were out of

her mouth, she realized that he was playing around with her.

He snickered and stood up straight. His shadow enveloped her. “Then why are you cramming at the last minute like this?”

“Well,” she replied, “just in case I missed something.” Despite her efforts to remain calm, the bright-red color on her cheeks was visible even in the darkness.

Even though it wouldn't have been the end of the world for her to slip from her spot as the top student in the class, she was determined not to let that happen. She felt that this was especially important because she was a female student, and even more so because she was Duchess Herhardt, the subject of a great deal of gossip. Many of the students in the class were cold to her for one reason or another, and she didn't want to let them win.

Matthias nodded, seeming to understand how she felt. He gently caressed her cheek, and then straightened her glasses for her.

She felt a sense of relief, along with a strange sense of longing. She cocked her head slightly. *No, not right now...* She shook her head to try to rid herself of the feelings that were bubbling up inside her, but it was no use. She wished that he would leave, but he remained in the same spot, staring intently at her with a calm, emotionless expression on his face.

She lowered her head to hide her reluctant excitement. Then she heard another chuckle. *He's messing with me again,* she thought.

Before she knew it, his lips were touching hers. The sound of her glasses being deftly removed and placed on the desk mingled with the sound of her quiet moaning. After a few quick pecks, it didn't take long for the kisses to grow deeper and more passionate.

Instead of struggling or pushing him away, she put her arms around his neck. His hair felt much softer than she remembered it. It felt just like the identically colored hair of their young son, Felix.

When the kisses, which had started out as gentle as the summer breeze, finally ended, her cheeks were as brightly colored as the roses in the vase on the desk. As she struggled to catch her breath, she noticed with disbelief how calm and composed he was.

His face neared hers again, and she reflexively closed her eyes in anticipation of another kiss. However, she didn't feel the warmth of his gentle breathing. Perplexed, she opened her eyes, and felt something being placed on the bridge of her nose. He had put her glasses back on her face for her.

“You've got to study, Layla,” he whispered, as he wiped the saliva from her lips with his finger. “Study hard,” he added, before stepping away.

His abrupt withdrawal made her feel even more flustered.

He casually walked away from the desk, before suddenly turning around just as he reached the door. He didn't seem fazed at all by the frown on her face.

“Will you please depart, Your Grace?” she asked, putting on a coy air of formality. “I'm really going to study now. I'm going to study so hard!” she added, picking up the pen with determination.

In response, he gave her a deep bow, as if he were a subject having an audience with a queen. She glared at him for a moment, irritated that he was teasing her like this. Soon, however, she couldn't help but laugh.

Having gotten the reaction he wanted, he turned and sauntered out of the room. When she heard the door latch shut, she let out a long sigh.

*He's so weird.*

She shook her head to try to clear her thoughts, but she couldn't rid herself of the strange excitement that his visit had left her with.

*What a weird guy he is.*

After rubbing her cheeks, which were still warm, she picked up the pen once again. *Now I've really got to study hard, just like my annoying husband said.*

* * *

Just as he had done the previous semester, Professor Lorenz posted the students' final grades on the wall for all to see. This practice of his bothered some of the students, but none of them had

the courage to confront him about it.

Layla snaked her way through the crowd, trying to get close enough to find her name on the list. Professor Lorenz was always the last instructor in the biology department to announce the grades for his class. Thus, the grades the students received today would also determine their ranking throughout the whole department.

Before Layla could find her name on the list, she heard a sarcastic voice addressing her, saying, “Congratulations, Duchess. You must be very pleased.”

She turned towards the voice and was not surprised to see Count Lemon. He always vied with her for the position of top student, but generally had to settle for second place. This fact alone would have soured his attitude towards her, but he seemed especially indignant that he was coming second to a woman. And not just any woman, but a woman who had been a lowly mistress before becoming a duchess.

“I must say, Duchess Herhardt, you seem to be able to get whatever you want in life, be it a good marriage, or good grades.”

His derisive remark was met with laughter from various other students nearby.

Before responding, Layla squinted at the list, looking for her name. Sure enough, it was at the top of the list—she had achieved a perfect score. Once again, she was the top student in the department.

“Why, thank you,” she said, smiling courteously, as she turned back towards Count Lemon. She tried to effect the most lofty, aristocratic demeanor that she could, in imitation of her husband. “It's so kind of you to congratulate me first.” Her voice was shaking slightly, but she managed to maintain her composure.

Up until the previous semester, she had been trying not to make enemies with him. Perhaps she would have still been trying now, if, a few weeks back, he hadn't made the mistake of insulting Felix.

“You're always so generous to your fellow students, Count Lemon. I really appreciate how you keep allowing me to have the

glory of first place every semester. Thanks to you, I think I'm going to have a wonderful summer break."

With each elegantly sarcastic word she spoke, his face grew a little redder.

"I hope you have a nice break as well," she added, nodding to him in mock respect.

She turned away from the wall with a bounce in her step. During the past year, she had gradually adjusted to college life as both the only female student in the biology department, and, naturally, as the only duchess in the entire university.

When she reached her bicycle in front of the building, she climbed onto it and started pedaling with more strength than usual. Her leather bag, its strap slung across her shoulders, shook against her back as she rode.

It wasn't long before rumors about the bicycle-riding duchess reached all the way to Arvis. Elise and Katharina were shocked to hear about it, but Matthias didn't bat an eye. After all, he was the one who had presented her with a new bicycle, after she told him how much she disliked being driven to and from campus by a chauffeur.

She rode the shiny, chrome bicycle off campus, and proceeded towards the sweet-scented park. She would have gotten back to the mansion faster by using the boulevard downtown, but she didn't mind going a little out of her way if it meant that she could pass through the park, with its beautiful forest path that reminded her so much of Arvis. Suddenly, she got excited as she remembered that she would be spending the summer in Arvis.

It had been her decision to stay at Arvis for her first summer break as a student. Matthias had suggested that they travel somewhere together as a late honeymoon, but she didn't like the idea of Felix staying at Arvis without her. Most of all, however, she missed Arvis and its beautiful forest. Despite all the pain and sadness she had experienced there, the precious memories she had from growing up there meant that it would always feel like home to

her.

When the mansion's gates came into view up ahead, she started pedaling faster. For the first time in quite a while, Matthias had the day off work today. She couldn't wait to brag about her grade to him. She knew how childish this desire was, but she wasn't ashamed. She knew he wouldn't mind. He was Matthias, after all.

As she reached the front of the mansion, a middle-aged maid curtsied to her and said, “Hello, Your Grace. His Grace is in the garden. The young master is with him.”

Layla's eyes widened, first with surprise, then with delight. “Did you say that Felix is with him?”

Perhaps Matthias had been joking when he suggested that they go off traveling without Felix.

She cut straight across the mansion's main hall, towards the back door that let out into the garden. Her braided hair bounced with her quick steps. As she walked, she pictured the heartwarming scene she was about to encounter.

She reached the garden and stepped onto the walking path. There was a gentle breeze carrying a strong, rosy scent.

Finally, she reached the rose-covered pergola. Underneath it were her husband and their son, who looked like a little version of his father. At the sight, she burst into joyful laughter.

# Side Story 2:
## Bird of Paradise (2)

Matthias slowly turned his head in the direction of the laughter. His assistant, who was standing next to him, reporting on some business matters, also turned to look at Layla.

Layla's eyes shifted from the two men to the post on the opposite side of the pergola, where Felix von Herhardt was standing with his hands behind his back, solemnly watching the two men. It was almost as if he understood what they were discussing. Matthias followed Layla's gaze, and let out a chuckle when he saw Felix.

Including the assistant, there were a few servants present. Quickly grasping the situation, they quietly retreated, leaving the three-person family to themselves under the pergola.

“Look at that,” Layla said, as she strode towards the father and son. “I guess you can't stand to be without Felix either, huh?”

Felix turned and, seeing his mother smiling at him with her arms spread wide, he toddled excitedly over to her and into her arms.

Savoring the sight of the mother and son together, Matthias set the documents he was holding down on the table next to him. He decided not to tell Layla that it had been the nanny's decision to bring Felix out to the garden. He didn't want to spoil the beautiful look of joyful appreciation in her eyes.

“I have something to tell you,” she said, as she carried Felix over to the table and sat down with him across from Matthias. Her green eyes were twinkling with excitement. “Try to guess what it is,” she added in a quiet, mysterious tone.

Rather than revealing that he already knew what she was going to say, Matthias played along, furrowing his brow. “Hmm...”

Felix, who had been giggling and tugging on his mother's braided hair, noticed the serious look on his father's face, and immediately furrowed his brow in imitation.

“I give up. Why don't you tell me, Layla?” Matthias said, leaning

forward to show his interest in what she had to say.

She smiled bashfully, and soon her cheeks were bright red.

*Layla,* he mouthed, as a smile spread across his lips. *Layla. My Layla.*

* * *

The train from the capital city arrived at Karlsbar Station. A group of Arvis employees, led by the butler, Hessen, hurried to line up in front of the special-class car. Many passersby on the platform, noticing the crowd of servants, looked expectantly at the train's door. Soon, they saw the face of the young man they were expecting: Duke Herhardt, Arvis's lord. As excited as they were to see him, they were even more excited to see the new duchess and their son.

“Hello, Your Grace,” Hessen said, bowing to his master with utmost courtesy, as always. The servants behind him bowed as well.

Layla still wasn't used to this treatment. She squeezed Matthias's arm nervously. The platform in front of the special-class car was already crowded with people trying to catch a glimpse of the young Herhardt family.

While Layla tried to catch her breath, Matthias nodded his head in response to the butler's greeting. He seemed very relaxed, as if he hadn't even noticed the crowd of gawking spectators. In other words, he was behaving like the perfect gentleman that the people of Karlsbar had come to expect.

While the onlookers exchanged expectant glances, Matthias stepped forward. His disregard for the onlookers made his elegant movements even more striking as he escorted his wife through the crowd.

Everyone reflexively stepped back to clear a way for them to pass through.

Looking utterly dignified, Duke Herhardt's demeanor was worlds apart from the flawed man he was portrayed as in the rumors about his scandalous marriage. The same was true of the duchess.

Wearing a turquoise sundress, Layla von Herhardt looked like any other lady her age. Despite her new status as Duchess Herhardt, she was clearly the same young lady who had grown up by Arvis's forest, raised by the gardener.

The crowd's attention then shifted to the nanny following behind the couple, and specifically to the future duke she was carrying in her arms. The little boy's blue eyes shone with delight as he took in the sights around him. There had been a scandalous rumor going around that the new duchess was a seductress who had fooled the duke into taking in a child from a different father. Now that everyone saw the incredible resemblance between duke and heir, however, this rumor could be decisively put to rest.

Before leaving the platform, Felix von Herhardt waved eagerly at the spectators. This innocent display was met with adoring laughter from the crowd.

“Summer has arrived in Karlsbar at last,” one of the onlookers said.

“You're right,” someone else replied.

For the people of Karlsbar, the return to Arvis of the House of Herhardt's masterpiece marked the beginning of summer each year in that northern city.

* * *

After gazing out the car window at the scenery passing by for a while, Layla suddenly turned towards Matthias and asked, “Remember the gift you promised me?”

Matthias, who had already been gazing at his wife, cocked his head slightly in response.

“You said that we could go on a picnic this weekend. All three of us,” she reminded him. The look on her face grew more serious as he continued to remain silent.

Meanwhile, he was just enjoying the beauty of her emerald-colored eyes, even though they looked a little darker now than usual.

While boasting of her grades to him, she had excitedly added that she had thought of a gift she wanted from him. She wanted to go on a picnic to Arvis's forest, just the three of them.

*"This time I'll really show you the field with all the flowers,"* she had cautiously added. *"There are so many pretty flowers that bloom in the summer at Arvis!"*

It hadn't taken long for him to grasp her meaning. She smiled, and he nodded knowingly.

*Layla,* he thought, *do you realize that you saved my life when you told me that the affection you showed me before we first parted wasn't a lie?*

"Don't feign ignorance," she said, narrowing her eyes at him as she scrutinized the expression on his face. "You're messing with me, aren't you?" she asked, in the same stern tone she used when scolding Felix.

Unlike Felix, however, Matthias laughed in response, which made her feel silly.

"I remember, Layla," he finally said.

His unexpectedly gentle tone made her flinch.

He stopped smiling and, gazing at her with a calm, contemplative expression, added, "I remember everything about you."

She often felt overwhelmed with emotion when he said profound things like this to her in such a dry, casual tone.

"You almost had me there," she said, speaking more forcefully than before. "But I know you're just teasing me."

"Am I?" he slyly replied, still staring straight into her eyes.

She stared right back at him resolutely, until finally she couldn't stand it and had to look away. Moments like this had been occurring more frequently lately—moments that felt both comfortable and uncomfortable at once. This perplexed her, but it didn't upset her.

While she mulled over this strange feeling, the car turned onto Platanus Road. They were almost to the gates of Arvis. The smile returned to her face as she looked out the window.

“Look, Felix! Isn't it pretty?”

Sitting on his mother's lap, Felix looked with amazement at the things she was pointing to.

“That's a plane tree,” she said. “And that bird? It's a thrush. And those little white flowers? They're called baby's breath.”

Felix babbled along with his mother, trying his best to repeat the terms she was teaching him. Layla gently corrected his pronunciation, laughing, and he laughed along with her. Their mutual laughter made Arvis's summer even more beautiful.

As Matthias listened to this beautiful sound, his eyes settled on the spot on the road where, several summers earlier, his life had been turned upside down when Layla fell from her bicycle. Still vivid in his memory were the sounds of the overturned bicycle's wheels spinning in the air, the leaves rustling in the breeze, and most of all, the pounding of his heart.

At the time, he had assumed that his passion for Layla was just a transitory thing that would soon pass. Instead, it had come to dominate his entire life. He now accepted this passion as an indelible part of himself, and he loved the beautiful days that he lived under its sway.

Leaving Platanus Road behind, the car passed through the shining gates of Arvis and proceeded towards the mansion. Elise and Katharina were standing in front of the mansion's front entrance, ready to greet the family. After being carried out of the car by his nanny, Felix was immediately passed into his grandmother Elise's arms.

“Welcome home, Matthias,” Katharina said, smiling brightly at her grandson. Her face retained every bit of benevolence as she turned towards the new duchess. “And welcome home, Layla.”

It was a starkly different greeting from the cold one she had given Layla the previous summer. Elise von Herhardt, who had never previously tried to hide her dissatisfaction with her daughter-in-law, was also showing nothing but warmth towards her now.

Before entering the mansion, Layla stared for a moment at the

foot of the stairs. It was the spot where years earlier, as a young orphan girl, she had looked with both fear and curiosity at the young duke.

Who would have imagined that this young girl would have become the next duchess? If someone had predicted this to her back then, she would have thought that they were delusional.

In fact, she could still barely believe it was true. To think that, after all that time of only being able to be with Matthias in the shadows, she was now living with him in the bright, open light of day, as his wife, Duchess Layla von Herhardt! Sometimes, it all felt like a dream. In such moments, it was usually Matthias who pulled her back to reality.

“Layla?”

She slowly turned her head at the sound of her husband's voice. She took a deep breath, and as she exhaled, her surroundings became clear to her again.

The couple walked side by side into the mansion's main hall. The lavish marble staircase and the dazzling light of the chandelier were as intimidating as ever, but Layla paid them little mind as she walked. Rather than letting those things distract her, she was making a list in her mind of all the things she wanted to do that summer.

*When the three of us go on our picnic, we should take a walk along the path where all the wild rose bushes grow. The field at the end of that path is as beautiful as a painting, with its birch trees and violets. Oh, and when the sun starts to set, we can watch the flocks of birds flying above the Schulter River. But for that, the most beautiful view is up in the big tree next to the river. Can Matthias handle that?*

With a look of solemn concern on her face, she whispered, “Matty?”

He looked at her.

“Do you know how to climb trees?” she asked, making sure to stay quiet enough that she wouldn't be heard by Elise and Katharina, who were walking in front of them.

He furrowed his brow slightly.

“If you don't know how, I can teach you,” she added, still looking utterly serious. “Would you like that?”

He stared blankly at her for a moment, hardly believing his ears.

“I won't force you to do it if you don't want to, of course,” she hastened to add. “I'll respect your wishes.” She could sense that she was digging herself into a deeper and deeper hole with each thing she said, but there was no backing out now.

Meanwhile, the couple arrived at the hallway that connected the central staircase to the drawing room.

Suddenly, he bowed his head reverently and said, “I will follow whatever orders you give, Your Majesty.”

A look of embarrassment spread across her face as she realized what he was doing.

*Don't do that!* she mouthed.

Paying no attention to her plea, he added, “My queen.”

He was whispering so quietly that only Layla could hear him, but that didn't stop her from feeling embarrassed.

She glowered at him, but he just smiled back.

*What a strange guy he is,* she thought, reconfirming this point to herself, before finally starting to laugh.

Just then, Elise and Katharina looked back at her. She could tell at once why they were looking only at her. As soon as they had started turning, Matthias had stopped smiling and assumed a stately, dignified posture as he looked at her, as if he had no idea why his wife was laughing.

Rather than scolding her daughter-in-law, Elise turned to the toddler in her arms and said, “Felix, your mother seems to be in quite a good mood today.” With that, she turned back around.

Layla felt like a fool laughing alone, but she knew that trying to explain the situation would only make things worse.

Once his mother and grandmother were facing away from them again, Matthias flashed another calm smile at his scowling wife. Suppressing the urge to shout the truth to everyone, she just

squeezed the arm of her irritating husband.

She could tell it was going to be a long summer.

# Side Story 3:
## Bird of Paradise (3)

Layla rode her bicycle down the forest path alone, surrounded by birdsong. When she reached its end, she saw the cottage.

She took off her hat and stood at the edge of the front yard, slowly taking in the sight. Even though no one had lived there for quite some time, the cottage looked just the same as when it had been her home.

Katharina and Elise had wanted to have the unused cottage demolished and replaced with a garden where they could have outdoor tea parties, but Matthias had firmly opposed this.

After hearing about this from Matthias's assistant, Layla had gone to Matthias and asked, *"What are you planning to do with Uncle Bill's cottage?"*

*"Why are you asking me?"* he asked, looking at her from across the desk in his study. To her surprise, he then said, *"It's up to you."* As his gaze returned to the stack of documents on his desk, he said in an even calmer voice, *"Whatever you want to do with it, that's what will be done."*

Taken aback, she paused for a moment, then replied, *"So you're saying that Uncle Bill's cottage is mine?"*

In response, he briefly glanced up at her and nodded, before resuming his work.

As he turned page after page, she slowly processed his response, before finally understanding the meaning of his simple nod.

She wondered how he felt about the situation, but she didn't ask. He seemed too engrossed in his work anyway. When she thought back on that day, the sound of him flipping through the documents echoed in her mind.

She checked her watch, then started riding across the yard towards the cottage. She still had plenty of time before her teatime with Dowager Herhardt.

She got down from her bicycle and leaned it against the porch, then entered the well-maintained cottage and slowly surveyed the interior. Most of the items that she and Uncle Bill had left behind had been gathered up and transported to the mansion in Ratse. All that remained were several larger pieces of furniture with dust covers on them. It was a lonely sight.

She decided to head out onto the porch. The two different-sized chairs had not been moved from their usual spots. She sat in her chair and looked over at Uncle Bill's large, wooden chair. She could almost see him slouching there, smoking a cigarette. Then she thought she could hear his gruff but kind voice, calling her name and laughing.

She and Uncle Bill had sat next to each other on this porch countless times, chatting together as they enjoyed the fresh air. She decided to strike up a conversation. “Uncle Bill, I'm going to college, just like you hoped I would. All the other students are male, but your Layla is number one in the class. Aren’t you proud?”

Chatting like this felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“Felix is doing well. He's growing so fast! It feels like just yesterday that he took his first steps, wearing the shoes you got him. But now he's running and talking! You must know that already, though. I'd like to have one more child who could wear those shoes, but my husband feels otherwise.”

She continued chatting like this for a long while, just like she had done so many times before. She talked about college life, about Felix, and about Matthias. Over time, her voice started to shake, but her smile grew more peaceful.

Finally, she opened her eyes and stood up. “I'll be back another time.”

The afternoon sunlight cast a long shadow on Uncle Bill's well-worn chair.

“I love you, Dad,” she said, before slowly stepping down from the porch.

As she put on her hat and got back on her bicycle, she felt a burst

of energy. She started pedaling at a brisk pace. As she soared back up the forest path, the skirt of her white dress flapped in the breeze.

She had not yet decided what to do with the cottage, but she was sure of one thing: it needed to become a place that would bring Uncle Bill joy.

With a look of determination on her face, she raised her eyes towards the sky. She could almost hear him laughing heartily and saying, *My little Layla has become an outstanding adult.*

* * *

The car carrying the Herhardt family emerged from the forest road and came to a stop by the Schulter River. The servants who had come in advance to prepare everything stood in a line to greet their master.

The chauffeur hurried to open the back passenger door. The first family member to exit the car was Matthias. Wearing a cream-colored linen suit, he looked as dignified as ever, like the flawless Duke Herhardt that everyone knew.

While the servants quietly admired their master's attire, a small foot wearing a strappy shoe emerged from the car. Out of habit, the chauffeur started approaching, then he abruptly stopped himself. Duke Herhardt didn't allow anyone but himself to escort his wife. All the employees of Arvis were aware of this rule.

Who would have thought that little Layla, the gardener's adopted daughter, would become the next duchess? Most of the servants present still thought of her as Arvis's child. They looked at the young couple with amazement.

Layla took the duke's outstretched hand and stepped out of the car. The ample skirt of her dress swayed with the gentle movement. Her green eyes were as warm as the summer sun as she took in the scenery. “It's a beautiful day!”

The duke's austere face softened in response to his wife's cheerful exclamation, and his whole bearing seemed to shift subtly, becoming less cold and stiff.

Some of the Arvis employees had already wondered if something had changed in the duke's personality. They now realized that this change was entirely due to his love for his wife, Layla von Herhardt. Far from being a sign of weakness, this only made him seem more sturdy and secure in the life he was leading with her.

The duke and duchess started walking side by side, and the servants followed behind them. Even with so many people traveling along it, the forest path was quiet and serene. Listening to the clear sound of the birds and the breeze, Layla looked over at Matthias. He was looking straight ahead as they sauntered down the path.

With bated breath, she watched his face as light and shadow alternated upon it. Soon, she realized that although he was facing forward, his eyes were looking straight at her. Her lips quivered for a moment, then she lowered her eyes, saying nothing. He had kept his promise. The outing was a little different from the one she had envisioned, but she didn't feel the need to mention this. It was just fine this way.

She looked into his eyes again and smiled, and then looked over her shoulder and gave an identical smile to their son, who was being pushed in a carriage by the nanny. No longer fussy about riding in the carriage like he once had been, Felix was cheerfully taking in the sights around him. Resisting the urge to run towards him and give him a hug, Layla turned to face ahead again.

There was a distinctly different order to things in Arvis, compared to the Ratse mansion. The former duchesses were allowing the couple to live their lives however they wanted in Ratse. When they stayed at Arvis, however, things were more strict. By now, Layla had grown accustomed to this. She was also well aware of Dowager Herhardt's requirement that the duke's successor should learn to live in both environments.

When they arrived at the picnic site, Layla gasped in amazement. It was a quiet spot by a brook where she used to take breaks from picking raspberries. Now, however, it looked completely different. There was a large picnic mat spread across the ground. Atop it was

an array of items that seemed completely out of place in the forest: a small stove with a tea kettle, ornate dishes and utensils, cushions and blankets, and a vase full of fresh flowers. Even though she herself had chosen the location for the picnic, she couldn't help but feel like she was visiting a place she had never been to before.

“It's like you took an entire room from the mansion and transported it here intact,” she said.

Matthias chuckled in response. The gentle expression on his face made him look even more like Felix. Perhaps that was why she kept feeling her heart flutter when she looked at him.

“Thank you,” she said. It seemed like it was going to be more burdensome of a picnic than she had expected, but she wasn't going to let that spoil their time together. “Thank you for keeping your promise.”

She trusted that he would continue to keep his promises, as he had always done in the past. No matter what anyone else said, she would always trust him. Today was yet another demonstration that he would continue to deserve her trust.

He responded to her thanks by reaching out and caressing her cheek. It was an innocent enough gesture, but she still felt bashful in front of all the servants. Even after he pulled his hand away again, her heart continued pounding anxiously. It was a feeling that she had only experienced since emerging from the fearful, shameful life in the shadows she had previously led. She now felt like she understood it, but it would still take a lot of courage to express it.

As they walked, suddenly she had the urge to talk to him. “Matty?”

He looked back at her.

“Oh, um...” she said, losing her nerve. She fiddled with the brim of her hat for a moment, then said, “The weather's really nice today, isn't it?” She cringed internally at this vapid remark, but it was all she could come up with.

Matthias smiled and nodded, then continued walking, eventually sitting down in the shade of a tree. The servants started moving

around the forest in perfect order.

Layla hesitated for a moment, then sat down next to Matthias without taking off her hat. She was going to need her hat for a little longer.

* * *

The order was delivered just as they were finishing their tea. The servants looked bewildered, while Matthias remained as calm as ever.

“Are you serious, Your Grace?” Mark Evers asked. “You want all of the staff to leave, including the nanny?”

“Yes,” Matthias replied. His eyes passed over the stunned faces of the servants, before returning to that of his assistant. “The preparations were carried out to perfection. You all did an excellent job.”

“But Your Grace-”

“Six o'clock,” Matthias said, pulling back his sleeve to check his watch. “Your team can return around then to clean up.” He was speaking in a roundabout way, but the meaning behind his order was clear.

Mark felt uncomfortable, but he knew he had to fulfill his master's wishes. At his direction, the servants all began to leave, like water ebbing away after high tide.

Layla looked around, perplexed. Once the nanny handed Felix off to her and departed, only the three of them remained in the forest.

“Is this allowed?” she asked, with worry in her voice.

It was true that she had requested some family time together, just the three of them, but this was Arvis, and they were supposed to abide by Dowager and Lady Herhardt's rules. However, Matthias simply stared blankly back at her, as if he didn't understand the question.

It then occurred to her that he was the lord of Arvis. He generally tried to respect the wishes of his mother and grandmother, but only when he desired to do so. Layla knew better than anyone that,

when he decided to do something against their wishes, there was no stopping him from getting his way.

There were a lot of things she wanted to say to him, but she didn't know where to start. She tried to break the ice by talking to Felix instead. Nonetheless, she could feel Matthias's intense gaze fixed on her.

He gently set down his teacup, and she jumped. Just as she was feeling silly for overreacting, he said, “Take it off now, Layla.”

# Side Story 4:
## Bird of Paradise (4)

Shocked, Layla turned towards Matthias, and saw his calm, blue eyes gazing back at her. The cold expression on his face was the same one that had previously made her wonder if he had emotions at all.

“What did you say?” she asked. Her serious voice pierced through the quiet of the forest. Her hands trembled as she held them over Felix's ears. “H-how can you say such a thing, in this place, with our son right here?!”

While she was thinking of what else to say, he reached underneath her chin, and deftly untied the ribbon from her hat. She had reflexively shut her eyes as soon as his hand started moving towards her; it wasn't until she opened them again that she realized what he had done.

With an ostentatiously slow movement, he handed her the hat he had just taken off her head. Then, remaining utterly calm, he picked up the teacup he had set down a moment earlier.

She stared at him blankly as she processed what had happened. She hated that he had manipulated her into overreacting, but she knew that scolding him would only make things worse, especially since he was now gazing at the forest scenery, calmly sipping his tea.

“Naturally, I won't ask that you take off anything more than your hat,” he said in a flat tone, as he gazed at the sky peeking through the gaps in the forest's thick foliage. “Whatever *you* are, Layla, *I'm* a gentleman.”

She frowned bitterly at him. “Do you find it amusing to mess with me like that?”

“Yes, it's amusing,” he said, narrowing his eyes as he turned towards her again, “and you always look so pretty when I do it.” He remained unsmiling as he said these things. “You're so pretty when

you blush."

"I can't believe you're talking like this in the middle of the day. How gentlemanly of you," she quipped, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I am a gentleman," he replied, leaning back onto the pile of cushions, "a gentleman perfectly suited to a virtuous queen."

Dappled shadows flickered upon his face, revealing that he was grinning. This, coupled with his relaxed posture, softened the atmosphere greatly. She was seeing a side of him that no one else got to see. This made it hard for her to resent his teasing.

"You know, I wasn't wrong to be worried," she confidently replied, rubbing her blushing cheeks. "As a scientist, I make judgments based on experience."

"Experience?"

"Yes. And experience has taught me that when you say something like 'Take it off,' you usually mean the thing I thought you meant. It was simply a scientific judgment based on empirical evidence."

He squinted with amusement as he listened to his wife prattle on. "And what, may I ask, is your scientific conclusion?"

"That you're the one who's in the wrong," she replied, her eyes shining sagaciously through her glasses. "You're as bad as a raven, Your Grace!" she shouted. Her cheeks were still the same pretty shade of red that he loved.

He burst into laughter. A breeze carried the sound across the brook, spreading it deep into the forest.

She hadn't been trying to make him laugh, but she decided she was done being upset. Matthias von Herhardt only laughed like this when he was with her. It was like a secret they shared. Thus, it was once again hard to resent him for it.

* * *

There was nothing particularly special or grand about the picnic. They had an ordinary conversation, and ate the delicious food. They also enjoyed a leisurely walk together. They spent the day in this manner, away from prying eyes.

As she enjoyed these simple moments, she realized that the wounds he had left in her heart were hiding the wishes she was harboring deep inside herself. For so long, she had held on to these wishes despite knowing that she shouldn't. She had felt so ashamed of them, she had hated herself for it. Perhaps what she hated most of all, however, was her own foolish heart, which had fallen in love with a man she should have hated, even though she knew she was betraying Uncle Bill by doing so.

She lowered her gaze from the distant sky and looked at the long shadows on the forest path. She checked the time, then sullenly whispered, “It's already time to go.”

Felix, who had tired himself out running around all day, was sound asleep in his mother's arms. His clothes were spotted with red stains from picking raspberries, like little souvenirs of their delightful picnic.

Matthias shifted his gaze from the sky back to Layla. There was a look of deep contemplation in her eyes, but when she sensed that he was looking at her, she grinned, and said, “The day passed by so quickly. It's a shame.”

“We'll have to do it again sometime,” he casually replied, as he pulled down the sleeves of his shirt and straightened his cuffs.

“Really?” she asked, looking at him with solemn anticipation.

He recognized this look, and could tell that she was trying to get him to give her his word.

“Really. I promise,” he replied.

Sure enough, the serious look on her face instantly gave way to a beaming smile. He knew of nothing more beautiful than the way her eyes looked at moments like this, when she was smiling at him as if he were her entire world.

Just as he was putting back on his suit jacket and fixing his tie, the servants returned. It was time for Matthias and Layla to turn back into Duke and Duchess Herhardt.

They walked side by side back up the forest path. The nanny followed behind them, carrying the sleeping Felix in her arms, and

the rest of the servants brought up the rear. When they reached the spot where the car was waiting for them, just as it seemed like the family picnic had reached its conclusion, Matthias delivered a final shock to the group of attendants. Turning to the chauffeur, who had just opened the back passenger door for them, he said, “Go on without us.”

“Pardon?” the chauffeur replied. “You mean-”

“We'll head back on foot,” Matthias said, eyeing the nanny to let her know that he was only talking about himself and his wife.

The nanny bowed her head and got into the car with Felix.

Layla looked at Matthias in disbelief, but he remained unfazed. Meanwhile, the car drove off, taking Felix and the nanny with it. If it hadn't been for the servants watching, she would have yelled at Matthias.

Instead, she bit her lip and accepted his outstretched hand, and he began to lead her along the side of the Schulter River, which was glittering with the golden light of the early-evening sun.

When they turned around the bend and were out of the servants' earshot, she grumbled, “Matty, what are you doing?”

“Didn't you say it was a shame that the day passed by so quickly?” he asked, in an innocent tone.

She frowned. “Sure, but...” She trailed off as she looked at the calmly flowing river, and the forest and the bright sky beyond it. Then she looked back at him.

“Felix is tired. He needs to rest,” he said.

She laughed. “Are you sure that's why you sent him away? It's not because you dislike him, is it?”

“Why would I dislike him? He's our son,” he replied, cocking his head slightly and furrowing his brow.

Naturally, he loved his son. However, it was a different type of love from that which he felt towards her, and he had no intention of denying this. He could never love anyone else as much as he loved Layla.

She stared intently at him for a while, and then her face softened

into a smile and she nodded understandingly.

He took her by the hand again and they continued sauntering down the riverside. Now and then, she stopped walking and pointed to birds she saw. Her voice sounded as clear and beautiful as birdsong as she told him their names and characteristics.

“Hey, see that bird up there?” she shouted, pointing excitedly at a colorful bird flying overhead. “Look! Quick!”

However, before he could raise his head, the bird had disappeared into the woods across the river.

“It's gone,” she said, looking glumly at the opposite riverbank. She lowered the hand with which she had been pointing, and put it back in his much larger hand. He gently squeezed it to show his remorse over the missed bird.

“Do you know how many rare birds and flowers there are here at Arvis?” she asked. “If Professor Lorenz saw this place, he'd say it was paradise. That bird just now was a really rare one.”

“Shall I catch it for you?” he asked in a flat tone, as he squinted in the direction the bird had flown off to. “Then you could stuff it.”

Her eyes went wide, and then she frowned and shook her head. “No!”

“Don't ornithologists do that kind of thing all the time?”

“Well, sure…”

Just as he said, catching and stuffing rare birds was a common part of ornithological research. Even Professor Lorenz, the ornithologist Layla respected most, had a large collection of stuffed birds.

“Even so, I don't like it when you joke around like that.”

Even though he didn't seem like he was joking, she decided to interpret his offer that way. She didn't want any stuffed birds that he had shot down, not even for research purposes.

He smiled to show that he would respect her wishes. Meanwhile, they had made it to her most beloved tree.

Gazing at the tree like someone reunited with their long-lost lover, she turned to him and asked, “Would you like to try climbing

it? There is no more beautiful view of the Schulter than the one from up there.

“Can you guarantee that?” he asked, while looking fondly up at the branch where she always used to sit.

“Absolutely,” she replied, nodding, as she walked towards the tree. After checking the surroundings with a cautious look on her face, she abruptly started climbing with lithe, nimble movements. When she arrived at her favorite branch, a thick one that extended out towards the river, she smiled down at him and shouted, “Did you see how I did that? Just climb the same way, and you'll be fine.” She seemed serious about teaching him to climb. Holding out her hand downwards, she shouted, “Here, I'll help you!”

Looking up at her tiny hand, he laughed. Then, nodding, he walked straight up to the tree and, without giving her a chance to offer him any help or instruction, he climbed all the way up to where she was.

Settling himself on the branch and leaning against the trunk, he pulled the astonished Layla towards his chest and embraced her. Through her back, he could feel that her heart was beating just as fast as his was.

“Tell me the truth,” she said, turning her head back towards him. “This isn't your first time climbing a tree, is it?”

Rather than replying, he just laughed again. His laughter cleared away her embarrassment.

She wasn't upset. In fact, she liked it. She liked hearing him laugh, she liked feeling the warmth of his large, strong body as he held her, she liked everything about this moment she was sharing with him. Those were her true feelings, and she didn't want to deny them.

* * *

Just like the picnic, there was nothing particularly special or grand about the conversation they had up in the tree. And just like the picnic, this very ordinariness made it all the more precious.

As they continued to talk and look at the view, the sun started to set. The river was imbued with the rosy tint of the sky. A flock of birds flew lazily over it.

“What do you think?” she asked with cautious optimism, as she caressed the arm he had around her waist. “It's beautiful, isn't it?”

He looked deep into her green eyes, which were full of pride at the scenery. “Yes, it's beautiful,” he replied. Then he put his lips up to hers, and whispered, “There's nothing more beautiful in the world.”

She flinched at the unexpected kiss, but she didn't push him away. As her breathing quickened, she reached up and softly touched his cheek. After caressing the contours of his face, she reached back and clutched his hair.

By the time their long, gentle kiss had finished, her skin was entirely flushed red, the precise rosy shade of red that he found more beautiful than any other color.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped her lips for her. On his own lips, there was a contented smile as relaxed as the summer evening's air.

“This weekend, I'll teach you how to swim,” he said.

“Swim?”

He gazed at the surface of the water, then turned back towards her and said, “I promised.”

“Oh, well… it's fine if you forget about that promise,” she said, smiling slyly.

“No, no, a promise is a promise. I'll teach you,” he insisted, smiling back at her just as slyly. She could see a flash of his younger self in his smile. “Right here, in the Schulter.” It was a beautiful smile, and it made it impossible for her to reject his offer.

# Side Story 5:
## Bird of Paradise (5)

The dreaded weekend arrived more quickly than Layla would have liked. One after another, her hopes that something could prevent Matthias from keeping his promise were dashed.

The first such source of hope was in Elise von Herhardt. She was planning to take Felix with her to a tea party today, so that she could show off the House of Herhardt's new heir to some relatives.

Normally, the thought of going to such an event would have made Layla anxious, but this time it was the opposite. Noticing that her daughter-in-law was expressing unusual interest in the gathering, Elise recommended that she come along.

However, Matthias responded before Layla had the chance, saying, *"I'm afraid that Layla has a prior engagement with me this weekend."* The politeness of his tone made him sound all the more resolute.

*"I guess she can't come along, then,"* Elise calmly replied. *"But Felix must come with me. Everyone's looking forward to seeing him."*

*"Yes, Mother,"* Matthias replied. *"That will be fine."*

With that polite exchange, the first of Layla's hopes vanished into thin air.

Her second hope came from Matthias himself. Despite being on vacation, he was still quite busy. He received several phone calls from work each day, and he frequently went out to meet with executives from his company who lived in Karlsbar. In addition, visitors came to Arvis regularly, hoping to have an audience with the duke.

Layla felt bad that Matthias wasn't able to enjoy a proper vacation, but today, she secretly hoped that it would turn out to be an even more busy day than the weekdays had been. Ideally, he would be so swamped with duties that he wouldn't return home until late into the night.

* * *

Her hope gradually increased as the day went on. Eventually, it was time for afternoon tea, and Matthias was still out. Just then, however, the butler entered the room and dashed her hope, announcing, “His Grace has returned.”

“You're back early, Matthias,” said Dowager Herhardt, setting down her tea cup as she greeted her grandson with a smile.

Matthias politely returned her greeting, then shifted his gaze to the other side of the table, where Layla was sitting.

“Oh, that's right, you have something planned with Layla today, don't you?” Katharina said, blithely unaware of Layla's trepidation. “Are you going into town together?”

“No, we're going to my cabin by the river, and I'm going to teach her how to swim.”

“The duchess? Swimming in the river?” asked Dowager Herhardt, dubiously furrowing her brow.

Layla's heart started pounding with anticipation.

“What a frightful thought,” the dowager added.

Her words were music to Layla's ears. This was her final sliver of hope: perhaps the dowager would put her foot down and forbid Layla from going into the water.

However, it seemed that Lady Luck was smiling on Matthias today, not Layla, because after considering the matter for a short while, Dowager Herhardt said, “I guess the times really have changed, haven't they? If a duchess can go to college, it would be silly to worry about her learning to swim.”

Layla gripped the hem of her skirt tightly, suppressing her urge to beg the dowager for help.

“I don't understand your generation's ways, but I won't force you to change them on my account,” Dowager Herhardt added. Turning to her granddaughter-in-law and noticing the anxious look on her face, she smiled reassuringly and said, “Have a wonderful time at the river, Layla.”

Just as Layla's final hope was going up in smoke, Matthias

approached her and held out his hand. He had a relaxed look on his face, like that of a predator face-to-face with its prey.

Layla reluctantly put her hand in his, while letting out a silent sigh. Usually she loved the way he was so good about keeping his promises, but in this moment, she hated that about him.

* * *

As he sat on a chair on the cabin's balcony, Matthias checked his watch. Then he looked up at Layla, who was standing in front of the railing, and said, “Surely you've had enough time to mentally prepare for our lesson, haven't you?”

She flinched at the question, then replied, “Please don't hurry me, all right? I need a little more time.” Despite the anxious look on her face, her voice was loud and clear.

Deciding to show her a little more mercy, he leaned back into his chair, loosely crossing his arms. Her cup of tea, sitting untouched on the balcony table, had long since gone cold.

For over an hour already, she had been glaring at the river, like she was staring down an enemy. The whole way to the cabin, she had been energetic enough, but once she saw the water, her courage had dissipated.

After several deep breaths, she turned to him and said, “But Matty, is it really that important to learn to swim? As long as one is careful not to fall into the water, wouldn't that be enough?”

“But surely you, more than anyone, know that unexpected situations can arise, don't you?” he replied.

“Oh, that...” She narrowed her eyes as she tried to think of a retort. As she thought back to the time he threw her hat into the river, she started to get angry. “The unexpected situation you're referring to was brought on by you!”

Without denying the accusation, he stared back at her, showing no remorse.

“Don't tell me you've forgotten about it?” she asked.

“No, I remember.” He uncrossed his legs and slowly rose from his

seat. “In fact, that's why I wanted to teach you how to swim in the first place.”

He approached her and leant against the railing. His body gave off a faint, cool fragrance, similar to the scent of the water mint plants that grew thickly along the riverside each summer.

“Layla, if you really don't want to learn to swim, I won't force you.”

She knew that he was telling the truth. She could tell from the look in his eyes—a deep gaze that resembled the beautiful water of the river.

“Oh, I just don't know,” she sighed, letting go of the railing and turning towards him. “It's not that I don't want to learn how to swim. I'm just scared.”

Indeed, he had offered to cancel the swimming lesson several times already. If it were simply a matter of not wanting to learn to swim, she could have said so and been done with it. But no, she *did* want to learn—but that only made her feel more frightened.

“And it's not just because of you that I'm scared of the water,” she continued. “I mean, your little prank made it worse, but it was a fear I had before I ever met you.”

As her mind flashed back to her memories of the origin of her fear of water, she turned away from him again and gazed once more at the surface of the river.

She could still hear the threatening words her aunt's children said to her: *“If you want to live here, you have to go through our hazing rituals. If you don't like it, you can leave.”*

She remembered the oldest boy among them, who was also the strongest, laughing hoarsely as he grabbed her by the braid and pulled her towards the river.

She tried to escape a few times, but her step-siblings always chased her down and brought her back. By the time they dragged her to the riverside, her body was covered with scrapes and bruises from falling and rolling on the ground.

She didn't want to live in a place like that. She hated everyone

there, from the uncle who would curse at her and beat her at the slightest provocation, to the step-siblings who relentlessly tormented her. She also hated the intense hunger she suffered there, which had led to her sneaking into the garden to steal vegetables to eat, even though she knew that she would get beaten if caught.

Despite hating everything about the place, however, she couldn't simply shout, *"I hate it here, I'm leaving!"* and go. She had nowhere else to go, and this was the source of her deepest wounds.

After being thrown into the river and almost drowning, as she walked back to the house, crying, she started to associate water with the helpless fear and sadness of those days. This made her even less inclined to tell Matthias about it.

As she thought about it, she realized that it had always been like that.

She had understood her predicament from early on. She could calmly accept sympathy from most people. But she hoped that she didn't seem pathetic to the empire's most admired nobleman, as futile as she knew that hope was.

She had felt this way since the day he had stepped on her coin, and then she had picked it up and run away. She still felt this way, and she probably always would.

"Layla?"

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of Matthias calling her name.

It was strange. When he said her name, it always sounded different from when anyone else said it. Perhaps it was because of his singsong tone, or else because of his quiet, gentle voice. She had wondered at this countless times before without ever figuring out the reason. Whatever the reason, though, it greatly lessened her anxiety.

"Are you sure it'll be all right?" she asked. Instead of clutching the railing again, she clenched her hands into tight fists. "I don't have the confidence to float in the water."

"As a scientist, I'm sure you realize that a person's buoyancy is

not a function of their confidence level," he quipped.

Ignoring his snide response, she looked up at the sky. Then, all of a sudden, she felt herself floating in the air. He had lifted her up. She screamed in shock, disturbing the serenity of the moment.

"I need a little more time to think! Just a little!" she shouted, struggling with all her might.

Paying no attention to her pleas, he proceeded to carry her in from the balcony, and down the stairs to the boathouse. She continued flailing about like an unruly child all the way, until they arrived at the platform at the edge of the water. Then she became stiff as a board, and her face went pale.

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and then continued out onto the dock. Their combined shadow fell across the sun-warmed wooden slats, all the way to the end of the dock.

The summer-afternoon sun glittered on the surface of the river.

* * *

The more she thought about it, the more she felt like a fool. It felt like an objective fact to her: she was a pathetic fool, slouching on the end of the dock, staring sullenly at the river.

As he swam, following the river's current, his body looked like a part of the water's shining surface. When she had been too afraid to get into the water, he had readily accepted it, before casually jumping into the water himself and starting to swim. After enjoying the water for a short while, he had flatly said, *"You can go."*

She thus knew that she was free to leave. And yet, for some reason, she was staying right where she was. She couldn't help but feel like a pathetic fool.

However, his behavior was equally perplexing.

She narrowed her eyes as she watched him.

If he was going to leave her alone like this, why had he been so insistent on keeping his promise and dragging her here?

He was now floating on his back, gazing up at the sky. He looked utterly free. It was a beautiful sight.

Suddenly, she felt a burst of courage. Clenching her teeth, she started taking off her shoes. Her movements were full of determination. Once her shoes were off, her courage held up just long enough for her to take off her stockings. Then it gave out.

As she looked down at the river, she felt a rush of vertigo and her body started trembling. She wanted to muster the same reckless courage that she had drawn upon all those years ago when she had jumped into the water to rescue her hat. Instead, the most she could bring herself to do now was let her feet enter the water as her legs dangled from the end of the dock.

After a while, Matthias swam back towards the dock. “You're still here?” he asked, feigning surprise.

His glistening body, half-exposed above the water, looked as hearty and strong as a tree at the height of summer. The scars peppering his torso in no way diminished the beauty of his manly physique. If anything, they heightened it.

“You certainly seem to be enjoying yourself,” she said.

“Indeed I am,” he replied, looking obliquely up at her as he held loosely onto the dock.

“So why did you interrupt your fun and come back over here?” she asked. “So that you could tease me?”

“If that's what you'd like me to do, I'd be happy to oblige.”

She stood up in a huff. Even though she knew that he was only gently ribbing her, she felt quite irritated. Ultimately, though, she knew that she herself, not he, was the source of her irritation and disappointment. She had come all the way to the end of the dock. Why couldn't she muster the courage to take the final step?

Once again she clenched her teeth, this time in anger. She hated herself for being shackled by her childhood memories.

*This is silly,* she thought. *I've been in far more difficult and frightening situations than this, and I made it through them just fine. So why am I chickening out now?*

She felt a strong urge to leave the riverside and head back to the mansion. However, she wasn't going to let herself do that. In her

fear, she had turned away from the river. Now she turned back and faced it confidently. Matthias was still in the same spot, looking up at her.

To rid herself of the anxiety that he was causing by staring at her, she took off her glasses. Then, one by one, she took off her blouse, skirt, and slip. She felt so embarrassed, her mind was in a daze. However, she was able to endure the feeling, thanks partly to the feeling of detachment her blurry vision brought her. She hesitated for just a moment, and then proceeded to take off her bra and panties, which she hid underneath the rest of her clothes.

The bright sunlight enveloped her bare body. She and Matthias gazed at each other, each of them silent for a different reason.

“I'm ready now,” she said, and she sat back down at the end of the dock and put her feet into the water again. “Well, to be honest, I don't really feel ready, but I'm going to give it a try anyway,” she added, suppressing the urge to cry.

Matthias slowly extended his hand towards her. She let go of the wooden piling that she had been holding on to, and firmly grasped his hand.

“You won't let go, will you?” she asked.

“Absolutely not,” he replied, shaking his head. “I promise.”

Since he had promised, she knew that she could trust him.

Clearing the last trace of hesitation from her head, she jumped into the water. The sound of her splashing and screaming rang throughout the calm riverside.

# Side Story 6:
## Bird of Paradise (6)

Even the most generous critic would have to rate Layla's swimming skills as dismal. In fact, what she was doing could hardly be called “swimming” at all. “Flailing wildly” would be a better term.

The lesson consisted of her screaming so loudly that Matthias thought he might suffer hearing loss, followed by her thrashing in the water—swallowing a great deal of it in the process—and then screaming again. However, when he allowed her to cling to his body, she became utterly calm and still. He would never forget the look of innocent trust in her eyes as she gazed at him during those moments.

Though she never quite achieved what could be called “swimming,” her lesson came to an end as the sun started to set. She was too exhausted to climb out of the water, so he lifted her up himself and sat her on the end of the dock. The sound of her panting for air blended with the gentle rippling sound of the river. He sat next to her, also breathing somewhat heavily.

“I bet the water level of the Schulter River has gone down a little. That's how much water I swallowed,” she said, laughing.

He stared at her, saying nothing in response. Her hair was darkened from the moisture, and her cheeks were flushed, both of which made the rest of her skin look especially pale. His eyes started to follow the droplets of water flowing down from her face. One of these droplets passed through the notch in between her collarbones, and then rode down her heaving breasts, coming to rest momentarily on her left nipple, the soft-pink color of which also stood out more than usual. The droplet then proceeded down her breast and belly, before disappearing in between her legs.

He then looked back at her smiling face. There was no sign of lust in his eyes, but something about the way he was looking at her

made her feel tense.

*This is silly,* she thought. *I just spent all that time swimming naked with him, so why should I feel embarrassed now? Especially considering that he's the father of my child, and we've been sharing a bed every night for almost a year!*

"Even if you don't think my jokes are funny, would it kill you to laugh?" she asked, as she wrung out her hair and draped it over her bare chest. "I'm feeling a little embarrassed right now." She pressed her knees together.

After gazing at her with his head cocked for a moment, he chuckled for her. Even once he did, however, she still seemed embarrassed, which suggested that her failed joke wasn't the real issue.

Twirling the ends of her hair around her fingers, she started looking around for her clothes. To her surprise, both of their piles of clothes were gone, and in their place were two small baskets, each containing a neatly folded towel and robe.

A mortified look spread across her face at the thought that someone had come to the dock while she was nude in the water. Matthias, on the other hand, remained perfectly calm as he unfolded the robe and put it on.

Seeing his body covered made her feel even more self-conscious than before, so she hurriedly retrieved her own robe and put it on. As she felt the robe's soft fabric against her skin, it reminded her of the way his gaze had been wandering all over her body moments earlier. The more she tried to repress this thought, the more intense it grew in her mind, which disconcerted her.

A sudden impulse then drove her to ask, "Shall we try again?"

The river's surface, reflecting the sunset, was now a deep shade of crimson. She still found it frightening, but also beautiful, and she wanted to throw herself into that beauty again.

"I have the confidence to float now," she said. "With just a little more practice, I can-"

"Slowly," he said, cutting her off, as he adjusted the belt of her

robe for her. His neatly tied knot fluttered in the breeze. “Summer is long,” he continued, as he held her chin.

His large hand felt cool and soft, as did his gaze as he looked at her. She stared blankly at the long shadows that his eyelashes were casting below his eyes.

“So there's no need to hurry,” he said. His face was now right in front of hers. He pulled her chin ever so slightly towards him, and she reflexively opened her lips. In a softer and yet more impassioned voice he said, “You've got plenty of time to learn.”

She nodded in response. She felt a familiar feeling of anticipation, and she felt confident that she knew what was going to happen next. However, instead of kissing her, he just stared intently at her face, as though he were measuring its dimensions in his mind.

Her eyes gradually widened in response to this mysterious behavior.

He wasn't hesitating. She was sure of that. In fact, she didn't think he had ever experienced hesitancy in his life. She knew that better than anyone, having experienced his unhesitating behavior towards her firsthand.

If it wasn't hesitancy, what could explain the delay? As she pondered over this question, she curled her toes as they dangled in the water. Even this minuscule movement caused ripples to form on the surface of the river.

After caressing her open lips for a short while, he abruptly let go of her face. When she cocked her head to show her confusion, he snickered.

Surprisingly, that was it. Once again, her scientific hypothesis had been proven wrong.

* * *

The duke and duchess's dinner was arranged on the table on the balcony, with a view of the Schulter River below. Steam was still rising from the hot food, but there were no servants in sight.

Layla had assumed that after the swimming lesson they would get

dressed and return to the mansion for dinner. When she saw the dinner laid out for them on the cabin's balcony, she looked at Matthias with widened eyes, knowing that it must have been set at his command. Ignoring her look of surprise, he calmly walked out onto the balcony and pulled her chair out from the table for her. His movements were as smooth and graceful as flowing water.

Quickly checking her reflection in the glass door of the liquor cabinet, she did her best to fix her messy hair and smooth the wrinkles in her skirt. The wide, lace collar of her blouse fluttered as she stepped out onto the balcony.

He waited for her to take her seat, and then sat down across from her. The table was packed with dishes. Every course, from hors d'oeuvres to dessert, had been laid out in advance, thus removing the need for servants during the meal.

Feeling very hungry after the swimming lesson, she started devouring the food right away. Throughout the meal, his eyes mostly remained fixed on her face, rather than on his own food.

Although she wasn't able to eat a large quantity of food, she savored each bite with a carefulness that he had never witnessed in anyone else. She took a small bite, chewed it thoroughly, swallowed, and then took another small bite. The experience of watching her gradually make her way through her dinner like this was extremely enjoyable for him.

Suddenly, she looked up, smiling brightly, and said, “Oh, by the way, in a few years, when Felix is a little older…”

He calmly lifted his gaze from her lips to her eyes. Noticing this, she flinched and picked up her napkin. Her lips flushed red as she thoroughly wiped them.

“When Felix is a little older…?” he said, prompting her to continue her thought.

She took a sip of water to moisten her lips, then went on. “Yes, when he's a little older, I think it would be wonderful if you could teach him to swim as well.”

“Teach him to swim?”

“Yes. I'd love it if you taught him personally, right here in the Schulter, just like you're teaching me.”

“Certainly,” he readily replied. “I'll do that.”

It was by no means a burdensome request, but she reacted to his consent with great delight, as though her dreams were coming true. It didn't take long, however, for her joy to give way to concern. “But Matty, are you planning to teach him to hunt, too?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied, just as readily as to her previous question.

When he was a boy, his father had given a hunting gun with his name engraved on it, and had personally taught him to hunt. It was a Herhardt family tradition that had been passed down for generations, and it was also considered an essential part of a successor's training. She nodded to indicate that she understood this, but her face remained sullen.

“It's my duty to teach him the skill of hunting, but I'll leave it up to him what he does after that.” He glanced down at the candles and centerpiece, then looked up again with a much gentler expression on his face. “Whether he wants to follow in his father's footsteps and become a renowned marksman, or follow in his mother's footsteps and become a compassionate expert on birds' minds, I'll support him either way. The decision will be up to him.”

She fell into thought for a moment, then asked, “And what about you? What's your decision for yourself? Are you going to open Arvis's forest for hunting this summer?”

“What do you think?”

“I... don't think you're going to,” she replied, looking at him with a hopeful glint in her eyes.

He looked right back into her eyes, and asked, “Why is that?”

“Because you, Duke Herhardt, are a compassionate gentleman who understands birds' minds,” she replied, maintaining her serious expression even as she gave this cheeky answer. “That's part of why you're the greatest gentleman in Karlsbar. Or rather, in the whole empire.”

He stared at her for a moment before once again bursting into laughter. It was such joyful, relaxed laughter, it would have greatly confused the servants, if any had been present.

Even though he hadn't given a definite response to her question, she could tell from the sound of his laughter alone that Arvis's forest was going to be peaceful this summer. And this peacefulness would be yet another sign of his love for her.

There was a much more relaxed mood for the rest of the dinner. Free of her uneasiness, she giggled and chatted on with delight. After the sun finished setting, the night sky was dense with stars, and their reflection twinkled beautifully on the flowing river.

“Look over there!” she shouted, pointing at a spot near the water. “It's a firefly!” She bolted up from her seat and ran over to the railing, moving as lightly as a little bird.

Taking a final sip of cold champagne, he stood up and joined his wife at the railing. More fireflies gradually appeared, until there were too many to count.

She watched the undulating swarm with a dreamy look in her eyes. It was a sight she had seen many times before in previous summers by the Schulter, but her heart was racing now as though it were the first time in her life.

*Maybe it's because it's my first time seeing it with you,* she thought, turning towards her husband and seeing his blue eyes fixed on her, as usual.

While she hesitated, unsure what she should say, he put his hand to her cheek. Unlike earlier in the evening, when she had looked completely exhausted, her face was now full of contented excitement.

“Why are you always messing with me like this?” she asked, knitting her brow.

“Messing with you?”

“Yes, and you did the same thing a little earlier, too.”

“Ah,” he replied, chuckling, as he clutched her chin. “It's no fun if you tire out too early, Layla.”

“What?” she replied. Her breath quickened as she thought of all those past times when he had grown more and more insistent as the night wore on. She felt a pang in her heart as she recalled the way she would wildly cry and moan and then black out entirely. She knew that he didn't like that behavior very much, but it wasn't a problem she could simply will away.

“I think you've had enough rest now,” he said, using his other hand to remove the pin from her hair. “And enough to eat.” Grinning, he clutched a handful of her hair as it flowed down over her shoulders.

As their bodies pressed together, she felt his warmth, which calmed her breathing again.

He slowly closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, they had a changed look in them. It was as if a switch had been flipped, turning him into a completely different person. It occurred to her that she was the only person in the world who knew him in this guise. The thought filled her with passion.

“Yes, thanks to your generous consideration, I feel well rested and well fed,” she replied, opting for a bold attitude instead of becoming flustered like she used to. Strangely, even though she was standing on the firm floor of the balcony, she felt the sensation of the water rippling around her toes. “And so, as my way of saying thank you, I'll grant you permission.”

She hesitantly extended her hand towards his beautiful face, relishing in the fact that it was hers, and touched his cheek. The rippling sensation had now progressed beyond her toes, and she felt like her whole body was submerged in the water again. Nonetheless, she decided to muster up her courage once more.

“You can do whatever you like,” she said. “That's what I want.”

# Side Story 7:
## Bird of Paradise (7)

With her eyes tightly shut, Layla felt a floating sensation, as though she were flying through the air. When she felt her body being placed on something soft, she opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was the night sky brimming with stars. Then she turned her head and saw the candles still glimmering on the table, and beyond them, the railing. Only then did she realize that she was lying on the balcony's sofa.

“Layla...” Matthias whispered. To stop her gaze from wandering aimlessly, he put his hand to her cheek and made her face him.

Their eyes met, and soon after so did their lips. Their lips intertwined, and their excited breathing mingled. She flinched at his forcefulness, but then proceeded to wrap her arms around his neck. She let out a faint sigh, but it was buried by the wet sounds of their lips and tongues.

She started gasping for breath, at which point he pulled back and licked up the saliva flowing down the side of her mouth before devouring her swollen lips again. It was a kiss that was both wildly aggressive and strangely affectionate at once.

“Ah...!” she cried out, her mind clouded with passion.

He clutched one of her heaving breasts. She could feel the heat of his body through their clothes. She moaned at the sensation and opened her eyes. He was looking at her with a sly, sensual grin on his face.

While she was looking at him through her blurry vision, he deftly unbuttoned her blouse. Then he placed his lips on the spot in between her collarbones through which he had earlier watched a gem-like droplet of water pass, and traced his lips along the path he remembered the droplet taking as it had flowed down her chest and belly. As the pile of her clothes on the floor gradually grew larger, the sound of her moaning gradually grew louder. As cries began to

mingle with the moan, he took off his jacket and flung it away. She heard him breathing heavily as he kissed her wet body all over.

"It's all right," he whispered repeatedly, gently holding her down as she writhed beneath him. "It's all right... You look so pretty, Layla..."

His words brought her a feeling of relief, even though she couldn't believe that he was speaking so gently while treating her body with such reckless abandon. Each time she nodded, her body relaxed a little more, even as he continued to manipulate this body with blatant lust. When she finally made eye contact with him again, she actually felt relieved. He grinned as though he could tell how she felt. Even in the dim light, she could see that his lips were bright red.

Turning away again, she looked up at the star-filled sky. Meanwhile, she heard him unbuckling his belt. Then his shadow covered her whole body, which was covered with sweat and hickeys. The sound of his moans and breathing were no longer gentle.

Her petite body moved along with each of his movements. However, he knew that he was really the one who was being swayed by her, and this brought him a deep sense of satisfaction.

"Layla… Layla… Layla..."

The name felt sweet on his tongue as it escaped his lips between heavy breaths. Each time she heard him whisper her name, she tried to regain the focus in her eyes so that she could see his face. He found this adorable.

He felt pleasantly overpowered by her charms. Ruminating on this feeling, he bent down closer to her. *Look at this,* he thought. *You're so lovely, it's driving me wild.*

He started kissing her with impetuous ferocity, as if doing this would shift the blame for his wild lust onto her. All the while, their bodies continued to move together.

While she listened to the cries and moans that were coming out of her unbidden, she alternately pushed him away and then pulled

him back towards her. She couldn't tell which action reflected her true desire, and she knew it didn't matter, anyway. Whether she wanted to push him away or pull him closer, nothing would change.

Once again, she had the sensation that her body was submerged in a bottomless river. However, she no longer feared the water, even while she gasped for breath and struggled.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. His tenacious gaze and unrelenting lust still overwhelmed her, but now it was mixed with a feeling of overwhelming joy. That distinguished nobleman, the masterpiece of the House of Herhardt, had been transformed into a creature of barbaric ardor. She knew that she was the only person in the world who knew this side of him, and this was the source of the joy she was feeling.

"Matty..."

His eyes narrowed as he heard her using the pet name she had made for him.

She had first tried out this pet name the morning after their wedding. The moment he opened his eyes in the sunny bedroom, he saw her looking at him with anxious anticipation as she lay in his arms.

*"Matty..."* she whispered. *"What do you think? Do you like it when I call you that?"* she asked, in a cheerful singsong.

It took him a moment to grasp what she was asking. When he did, it made him laugh. Prior to their marriage, she had stubbornly insisted on addressing him as *Your Grace*, no matter how many times he told her to call him *Matthias.* Now that they were married, it seemed that she had finally decided to drop the formality.

But *Matty?* At first he wasn't sure how he felt about it.

He vaguely recalled being addressed that way as a small child, but no one had dared used that embarrassing diminutive since he had become Duke Herhardt, not even his mother or grandmother.

But now Layla wanted to use it as her pet name for him. If it had been anyone else, he would have swiftly refused to allow them to address him that way. But hearing it from her lips, he loved it. He

also found it appealing that no one but her would ever address him that way.

*“If you don't like it, just tell me, and I can just call you Matthias like you've been requesting,”* she kindly added, searching for a reaction on his face. *“Personally, I prefer Matty. But I'll leave it up to you.”*

He realized that the choice she was giving him wasn't really a choice at all, so he smiled in silent acquiescence. From that moment on, he was her Matty.

“Hey, you know what?” she asked, smiling innocently, as she moved her little hand from his shoulder to his cheek. “You're mine now. I'm yours, but also, you're mine.” It was the kind of cheeky comment that he would have made to her.

He stared at her for a moment, wondering if she knew what she was saying. Then he burst into passionate laughter. There was something almost eerie about his breathy laugh.

*Layla,* he thought. *Goddamn it, Layla.*

He gripped her hand against his cheek, and soon he couldn't help but squeeze it. In that moment, he felt so much desire for her, he almost wanted to crush her hand, or swallow her whole. However, all he could do was slowly kiss her slender wrist, through which he could feel her racing heartbeat.

“You're right,” he whispered, nodding submissively.

A bead of sweat flowed down his neck, passing over his twitching Adam's apple, and disappeared under his shirt collar.

“I'm yours, Layla.”

As he sat upright, gazing at her, there was nothing left in his calm eyes but an unrelenting desire.

* * *

It was a clear summer night. The sky, the river, and the forest between them were all suffused with milky starlight.

The noise that was disturbing the night's serenity finally died down, just as the fireflies were finishing their dance. After a long series of pained cries and hoarse moans, a deep silence ensued.

Matthias kept his face buried in Layla's neck until he finally caught his breath. Her eyes were closed, and she was still panting. Her bare shoulders were shivering slightly.

Pulling her closer towards him, he licked the tears from her eyes. Then he rolled onto his side and reached down to the floor to pick up the jacket he had earlier flung off. As he draped the jacket over her shoulders, his movements were so gentle, it was like he was a different person from the man who had been treating her so roughly moments earlier.

After a while, she opened her eyes and turned towards him. Rather than looking at the starry sky, his beautiful blue eyes were pointed straight at her. Other than his loosened tie and his wrinkled, half-unbuttoned shirt, he looked remarkably neat and tidy.

For a moment she felt irritated at this, but soon this feeling gave way to laughter. It wasn't so bad seeing him lose his composure.

She softly placed her forehead against his, and gently rubbed noses with him, before giving him a playful peck on the lips. The kiss was full of the same relaxed contentment and affection that he always showed her.

He chuckled, and patted her head appreciatively, before putting his hand firmly to her cheek. This time, he kissed her. Compared to hers, his kiss was so skillful, and so sweet, it made her want to cry, but she held back her tears.

In that moment, she felt like her heart was twinkling like a beautiful star. It was a strange but wonderful sensation.

* * *

It was almost midnight when the duke and duchess finally left the cabin. It would have been fine if they had stayed there overnight, but Layla insisted on going back to the mansion. Assuming that this was because she missed Felix, Matthias gladly assented.

They walked hand in hand along the forest path, while all around

them owls hooted and nightingales sang in full-throated ease. She turned to look at him several times as they walked, enchanted by the simple fact that they were traversing this path together.

The lonely nights when she had walked back from the cabin alone lingered bitterly in her memory. She had always felt shameful and sad during those walks, and on those occasions when he had shown her some kindness, her self-disgust had made the walk even harder to endure. Thus she had often wished that he would simply continue treating her cruelly, despite a persistent hope that things would get better.

At the time, she knew that whether he treated her kindly or cruelly, she would end up getting hurt. And yet she couldn't rid herself of her hope. This desperate situation had often brought tears to her eyes as she walked down the path alone.

Little had she known that the real reason for her feelings was love. Perhaps she had been trying not to admit that to herself.

As the air around them stared to smell sweet, Matthias whispered, “Layla?”

This snapped her out of her reverie. They had made it to the mansion's rose garden.

Looking at his face, she could tell that he was wondering what she had been thinking about. “It's nothing,” she lied. “I'm just sleepy.”

She wasn't sure why she felt the need to keep her thoughts to herself. It might have been out of pride, or a desire not to disturb the happiness of the moment, or something else. Whatever the reason, she didn't want to dwell on those shadowy memories. Luckily, Matthias seemed satisfied with her response.

She was ready to return to the mansion, give their sleeping child a goodnight kiss on the cheek, fall asleep next to her husband, and wake up to a fresh new day the next morning. However, something unexpected happened just as they were reaching the end of the path.

Matthias abruptly stopped his leisurely steps and stood in place.

His eyes were fixed on a flowerbed full of pale pink roses. As he stared pensively at them, a bitter smile spread across his face.

They were the same roses that, many years earlier, he had torn out of the ground, crushed, and thrown aside. They were the same beautiful roses that he had never been able to forget, because they always reminded him of that girl, the girl who drove him wild even though she should have meant nothing to him.

In sharp contrast to the way he had mercilessly destroyed the roses back then, this time he stooped down and carefully picked the most beautiful one in the entire bed. Then he meticulously removed each of the thorns from its stem. He chuckled quietly as he remembered the scrapes that his previous encounter with the roses had left all over his hands.

“What are you doing?” Layla asked, looking at him with puzzlement.

Holding the thornless rose in his hand, he slowly turned to face her.

# Side Story 8:
## Bird of Paradise (8)

Layla's confusion deepened as she watched Matthias, wondering what he could possibly be up to. *No way,* she thought. Her heart was racing with cautious expectancy, tempered by skepticism. *No way that he's doing what I think he's doing. Not Matthias von Herhardt.*

Her heart beat harder and harder. Soon it was pounding so loudly, she worried that he would hear it, so she took a step back. However, he immediately took a step towards her, closing the gap. Then he took one of the pigtails on the side of her head in his hand, and gently inserted the rose into it.

Holding her breath, she stared at him in disbelief. The sound of the rose's stem rustling in her hair seemed as loud as thunder. Strangely, she felt more flustered and embarrassed now than she had when their bodies were intertwined earlier in the night. He, on the other hand, seemed completely relaxed.

“What's this for?” she asked, feeling at the rose in her hair. “I'm not a little girl...”

When she was a child, she had often made floral crowns for herself and worn them as she played in the woods. But now she was all grown up. She was a wife, a mother, and, whether she liked it or not, she was Duchess Herhardt. Thus, it felt completely inappropriate to wear a flower in her hair now.

However, just as she was about to remove the rose, he whispered, “It looks pretty on you.”

She froze, her hand hovering hesitantly by her head. He gently grasped her hand, and gazed at the rose with the satisfied smile of a god gazing upon his creation—the arrogant but merciful smile of a ruler.

She let her hand fall to her side, leaving the rose where it was.

Still gazing contently at her, he loosely clutched her chin and, slowly stooping towards her, gently kissed her soft lips, which

themselves resembled a fresh-bloomed rose.

He now felt like he finally understood the reason why he had recklessly torn those roses from the ground on that summer afternoon all those years ago. It was because of the same longing that he was feeling for Layla right now. In fact, deep down he had known this all along, but had gone to great lengths to keep from admitting it to himself.

He grasped her hand again and started walking. As they walked side by side, their shadow followed them from the garden to the marble staircase leading up to the mansion.

“You know, it's getting harder and harder to believe what you say,” she said, when they were about halfway up the stairs.

He responded by raising his eyebrows.

“You're always telling me I look pretty. You say it so often, sometimes I wonder if you really mean it.” Even as she was grumbling, she was gazing at him with a look of gentle expectancy. Despite her attempt to appear stern, it was clear that she just wanted to hear him call her pretty again.

“I see,” he replied, playing along with his pretty fairy, whose acting skills were as dismal as ever. “Then let me try to restore my credibility by saying it again.” In an unusually emphatic, exaggerated tone, he then said, “Wow! Look at the pretty flower!”

She scrunched up her nose and replied, “Come now, that sounds even more like a lie! Why are you talking in that strange tone of voice?”

He was behaving as though he were a bad actor.

“Wait...” she said, noticing the smile that was creeping onto his face. “Was that my line?”

Suddenly her mind was flooded with memories that she had tried to forget of her awkward performance in the children's play at the benefit concert. As he looked at her shocked face, he started to chuckle.

“Why in the world did you memorize that?” she asked.

“It was far too memorable to forget,” he replied.

“Stop talking about it! I don't even like to think about it.”

She started briskly walking away from him up the steps, but he had no trouble keeping up with her.

Grabbing her hand, he said, “But Layla, I think my performance was pretty good. Maybe even better than yours was!”

“I told you to stop talking about it!” she replied. Pulling her hand from his, she started running. The sound of her swift steps made it all the way to the mansion's silent main hall. Fortunately, he didn't chase after her this time, which brought her some relief.

Just then, she heard the sound of people talking, coming across the mansion's main hall. Before she could hide, she came face to face with the source of the sound. Elise von Herhardt was just now returning home, having stayed out later than planned.

Startled, Layla hurried across the hall. When Elise saw her daughter-in-law approaching, her eyes narrowed like those of a sleepy cat.

Fortunately, Layla managed to greet her without committing any breaches of etiquette. Matthias, who had just entered the hall, went straight over to them and stood next to his wife. Layla's relief at her passable decorum was wiped away at once when she saw the way Matthias greeted his mother.

On the surface, his simple movements were not unlike hers. But somehow, they gave off a completely different, far superior impression of aristocratic grace and dignity. As he faced his mother with his head held high, he looked so elegant and well-mannered, it was hard to believe he was the same man who earlier had been openly lusting after her and playing childish pranks.

“I see that you two are home late as well,” Elise said, her eyes finally showing satisfaction. “Thanks to Felix, my gathering today went quite...” She trailed off, letting out a brief sigh. Her eyes were fixed on Layla, specifically on the pale-pink rose stuck in her messy pigtail.

Layla stood for a moment, wondering what was the matter. When she remembered the flower, she started blushing and put her hand

to her hair.

“I was just scared. Your voice and bearing were just so elegant and aristocratic,” Elise said, laughing as she gently chided Layla with sarcasm. “Felix, it looks like your mother is in quite a good mood once again,” she said to her grandson, who was sound asleep in the nanny's arms.

With that, Elise turned and walked away, her heels clicking rhythmically as she receded out of sight. Layla then turned to Matthias and looked at him with tears in her eyes. However, despite being responsible for the very thing Elise had criticized her for, he showed no remorse. Instead, he simply reached out to straighten the rose in her hair. Then, as he gazed into her eyes, he whispered, “So pretty.” There was no longer any playfulness in his voice. He seemed completely unfazed by the criticism his mother had just leveled on his wife.

Seized by a strange feeling, Layla lowered her eyes. Matthias was utterly indifferent to her reputation among the noblewomen of high society, a group which included even his own mother and grandmother. This was very hard for her to understand.

“You look so pretty, Layla.” Displeased with her wandering gaze, he used his finger to gently lift her chin. When their eyes met, a subtle smile spread across his face, like ripples spreading across calm water.

When she noticed the smile, she reflexively held her breath. Once again, she heard the sound of water splashing in her mind, and her toes started to tingle. Hoping to rid herself of this feeling, she quickly accepted his outstretched hand. At least she could avoid looking into his eyes as long they were walking together.

Led by her husband, she ascended the staircase, under the light of the main hall's chandelier. The petals of the rose in her hair trembled minutely with each step, as did her heart.

* * *

The rose spent the rest of its bloom in a vase on Layla's desk.

Before it withered, she plucked off one of its petals and placed it between the pages of a heavy book, so that she could preserve a piece of the first flower Matthias had given her. Strictly speaking, he had given her other flowers before this one, but he didn't seem to remember that, so she had decided to consider this one the first.

Holding the book with the petal in it, she sat on the sunny windowsill. As she gazed down at the rose-filled garden, memories started to fill her mind. These memories were quite colorful, just like the flowers in the garden where they had occurred.

In her mind, she was soon transported years into the past, at the beginning of summer when she was still a girl. It was a summer that began with sadness.

The migratory birds she had been longing to see had just returned to Arvis. The frightening yet handsome duke, whom she had not longed to see at all, had also just returned. Ever since she had first come to Arvis, her summers had begun with these two opposite feelings.

Before the excitement surrounding the duke's return subsided, the guests who would be spending the summer at Arvis gathered. Among them, naturally, was Lady Claudine. Layla wanted to avoid Claudine as much as she wanted to avoid Duke Herhardt, but Claudine seemed to feel differently.

“Let's go. Miss Claudine is looking for you,” Claudine's maid said, after appearing at the cottage out of the blue.

Layla had been hurrying to finish the laundry so that she could bake some snacks for Kyle, so the maid's arrival came as quite a shock. As reluctant as she felt, she obediently followed Claudine's order and went with the maid.

Last year, when Uncle Bill had gotten furious about a similar situation, Chef Mona had anxiously said, *“I know that Layla isn't an employee of the House of Herhardt, but since she's living here at Arvis, there's nothing we can do about it. I know you're upset, but you have to put up with it. If she goes against an aristocratic order, there will be consequences for you, Bill.”*

Layla had overheard this conversation on her way back from cleaning out the goat pen.

Consequences for Uncle Bill? Her heart had sunk with fear at the thought, and she had felt ashamed for having told Uncle Bill about how upset she had been when Lady Claudine had summoned her before.

To her, the thought of being kicked out of Arvis was horrible, as was the thought of whatever "consequences" for Uncle Bill that Chef Mona had been talking about. Thus, she knew that she had no choice but to go along with Lady Claudine's wishes.

Claudine was sipping tea under the rose-covered pergola in the mansion's garden. Even though she was barely a year older than Layla, she had always been much taller and more developed than her. But in the year since they had last seen each other, the differences between them had grown even more distinct. Now Lady Claudine truly looked like a full-fledged noblewoman, with a curvy body, lustrous skin, and a sensual beauty as bright as the summer flowers. Layla, on the other hand, still looked like a little girl.

Layla stared at Lady Claudine for a moment, shocked at the sight. When Claudine saw her, she put on a friendly smile and said, "Layla, it's been so long. Have you been well?"

"Yes, Miss Claudine," Layla replied, giving exactly the response that experience had taught her to give.

Claudine slowly looked Layla up and down, and then giggled and nodded, saying, "Yes, you certainly look like you've been doing well."

Layla could instinctively feel that Claudine was teasing her. At this time in her life, she was used to being teased by her classmates at school, most of whom already looked like young ladies. Even Chef Mona, who up until last year had only had positive things to say about her, had recently begun to express concerns, saying things like, *"I really hope Layla becomes a lady soon."*

Layla now understood the meaning of such comments. She found it a little frightening to hear her friends, who already looked like

young ladies, whispering among themselves. But more than that, she felt great sadness at the thought that she alone was being excluded from their world.

Thankfully, Lady Claudine only asked her to gather some roses, and then sent her off on her way. Lately, Claudine had been diligently practicing the craft of flower arrangement. Even Layla, who couldn't arrange flowers to save her life, could tell that Claudine's skill was quite impressive.

After receiving her payment, as she walked back to the cottage, she kept thinking of all the girls around her age, such as her classmates and Claudine, and how pretty they had become. When she thought about how she looked in comparison to them, she couldn't help but sigh.

*At least I've gotten taller,* she thought, trying to console herself. Her arms and legs had gotten longer recently, giving her a lanky appearance. When Uncle Bill saw her wearing a new outfit, he had remarked that she looked like a newborn fawn. Her chest had started to develop ever so slightly as well. That wasn't something she wanted to discuss with Uncle Bill, however.

Suddenly she stopped in her tracks, wondering, *What if this is it? What if I never grow up any more than this?*

Just then, the silence of the forest path was disturbed by the sound of a horse approaching. Before she could run and hide, the man riding the horse appeared.

It was Duke Herhardt, the lord of Arvis.

# Side Story 9:
## Bird of Paradise (9)

When the duke saw Layla frozen with fear on the forest path, he brought his horse to a stop a moderate distance away. Fortunately, he didn't appear to have his ghastly hunting rifle with him. His friends, who arrived soon after, were also unarmed.

Layla hunched her shoulders, gripping the coin tightly in her fist. Even if the duke was only out for a horseback ride, not for a hunt, he was still frightening.

“Hi there,” said a young nobleman with blond hair, from behind the duke. “It's been a while.”

As soon as she heard his voice, which was gentle like the duke's but a little higher and with a warmer tone, she knew it was Marquess Lindman, a cousin and friend of the duke's, and one of the people who visited Arvis every summer.

She bowed her head to return his greeting, then hurried off the path and stood under a tree. Her heart was pounding so hard, she could barely hear anything else.

It was unlucky that she had run into the duke like this, but it was very fortunate that he wasn't alone. She always tried to avoid him, running and hiding when she saw him coming. At some point, he had noticed this, and had started tormenting her by chasing after her like he was hunting her. He did this whenever they crossed paths while he was out on his own, hunting or riding. It seemed to have become a favorite pastime of his.

Even though he was treating her so cruelly, she knew she was the only one who had witnessed this twisted side of him, so there was no one to whom she could complain about him. She knew that if she did, she might be branded a liar and kicked out of Arvis. Thus, she had no choice but to put up with the frustrating situation.

“Who's that?” asked one of the young men in the group.

“Oh, that's the orphan girl who's living here at Arvis,” another

young man answered. “I think the gardener is raising her.”

A few more words were exchanged, but the duke remained silent.

Layla kept her eyes stubbornly fixed on her dirt-covered shoes until she heard the horses trotting off. Then, she furtively looked up. As she watched the duke ride past, there was a mixture of fear and curiosity in her light-green eyes.

It had been over a week since the duke had returned to Arvis, but this was the first time she had gotten a good look at him. He was still as beautifully handsome as ever and looked a bit more mature than before.

Suddenly she remembered overhearing some Arvis employees talking about how once he graduated from college, he was going to become an officer in the military and bring honor to the family.

*Does that mean he won't spend his summers in Arvis anymore?* she wondered. *The military doesn't have summer break, right?* This faint sliver of hope caused her heart to start pounding again.

For a long while, she stood in the same spot, watching the duke and his companions recede into the distance, and prayed earnestly for the duke not to return to Arvis the following summer. That was all that she could do.

Once the young men were out of sight, and the dust raised by their horses' hooves had settled, the forest was restored to its peaceful state.

She then continued walking softly down the path towards the cottage. The sunlight felt very hot on her face. It was strange—it was almost evening, so why was the sun shining so brightly?

* * *

It was about two weeks later that the bloodstains appeared.

She woke up earlier than normal one morning, roused from sleep by a strange, uncomfortable ache. Uncle Bill seemed to still be asleep, and the cottage was suffused with an early-morning silence.

After lying curled up in bed for a moment, she got up. When she first glimpsed the red stains on the sheets, she thought she was still

dreaming. When she discovered similar stains on her nightgown and underwear, however, she knew it wasn't a dream.

It seemed that the thing she had heard her friends whispering about had happened to her. Apparently, her fear that she would never grow up had been unfounded. This brought her some relief, but at the same time, she was starting to panic over how to deal with the blood. While she was vacillating between these two opposing feelings, she heard Uncle Bill's heavy footsteps.

She hurried to lock the door, and then she hid her stained sheets and clothes under the bed. She awkwardly stuffed a handkerchief into a fresh pair of underwear and put them on, then put on a clean nightgown.

Just then, Uncle Bill knocked on her door and said, “Layla! Are you up? You're not sleeping in, are you?”

“No!” she answered, almost screaming her reply out of nervousness. “I'm up, Uncle B-Bill!”

“All right. Well, you'd better hurry up and get ready. That rascal Kyle will be here to pick you up any minute.”

*Kyle!*

Her panic intensified as she remembered the important outing she was going on today. Several of the children from the village were going on a picnic together, and in the afternoon they were going to go see a play. It was going to be her first time going to the theater, and she had been eagerly looking forward to it, even up to the previous night.

While Uncle Bill was out tending to the animals, she hurriedly washed her body. Her belly was aching more and more, but luckily the stress of the situation distracted her from the discomfort.

She rushed to get dressed and put breakfast on the table. Just then, Kyle arrived at the cottage. When he heard her say that she wouldn't be going on the outing, he looked utterly shocked.

“Why not, Layla? You've been so excited about going to the theater.”

“I know I have,” she replied, awkwardly taking the bread loaf out

of its basket. “I just don't feel like going anymore.” As she sliced the bread, the pieces came out crooked and uneven.

“You're lying! I don't believe you. What's the real reason? Oh! Are you sick?” He looked closely at her face for a moment, then furrowed his brow and said, “Look at you. You're as pale as a ghost.”

“No, I'm not sick.”

“Come on, Layla, you can't fool me. I know that when you get sick, you always try to endure it on your own. You wait here. I'm going to go get my dad so he can-”

“No! Don't!” she shouted, turning towards him. It looked like she was ready to hit Kyle with the remainder of the bread loaf in her hand.

“Uh... Layla?”

“I'm sorry, Kyle.” She put down the bread and rubbed her cheeks, which were getting hotter and hotter. “I do feel a little under the weather, but it's nothing serious. I just need to stay home and rest, and I'm sure I'll feel better soon.”

“What sort of illness do you have? Can you at least tell me that? I won't tell my dad if you don't want me to. It'll just be between you and me.”

“Well...”

Kyle was her best friend, and was like a brother to her. Even so, she didn't want to tell him about what was happening.

“Please, just leave, or you'll be late to the picnic,” she said, almost on the verge of tears.

*You'd better leave before I whack you with this bread,* she thought, but resisted saying.

* * *

Uncle Bill returned just after Kyle left. He was very surprised to learn that Layla wasn't going on the outing, but luckily he believed her when she said she was sick. Technically speaking, it wasn't even a lie—her belly was aching quite severely now.

“Sure, you should get some rest, then,” Bill said. “How bad are you feeling, though? Maybe I should call Dr. Ettman-”

“No!” she shouted, even more desperately than when Kyle had said the same thing. “I'm just going to rest. I'll eat plenty of food, and I'll avoid going out into the forest or doing any chores that might tire me out. I'm sure I'll feel better soon. All right?”

Bill stared at her as she parroted the advice he had given her, and then he laughed heartily. After patting her head in his rough but friendly way, he headed off to work.

Once she was alone, it was much harder to ignore the cramps she was feeling. She spent the morning deliberating over what to do. She was embarrassed to tell anyone, and she didn't like the idea of asking for a favor anyway. As the cramps continued to worsen, however, she gradually realized that she couldn't handle it on her own.

Finally, she made up her mind, and left the cottage. Even though it was a swelteringly hot day, she was wearing thick stockings and a petticoat under her dress. However, she still worried that she might be bleeding through all these layers, and she stopped several times on the way to the mansion to check her skirt for blood, which made the trip take her much longer than usual.

“Hey, Layla! What are you doing over here?” shouted Chef Mona, bolting up from where she was sitting in the staff's break room.

The other employees, resting after finishing lunch service, also looked at Layla's face peeking through the doorway.

After hesitating for a moment, Layla said, “I need to talk to you about something, Chef Mona.”

Chef Mona followed her out into the hallway and shut the door behind her. When she saw that Layla was still hesitant to say anything, she led her down to the end of the hallway, away from everyone else.

“All right, there's no one else around now. Tell me what's on your mind, Layla.”

“Well...” Layla took several deep breaths, rubbing her hands

together nervously. “I think I've finally become a lady.”

“A lady?” Chef Mona asked, sounding bemused.

Feeling dizzy with embarrassment, Layla nodded forcefully. “But I'm not sure how I'm supposed to…. deal with it.”

“Hold on. Are you saying that you...” Chef Mona fell silent for a moment, and then her eyes widened. “Oh...” She sighed as she noticed the thick clothing Layla was wearing. “My goodness, Layla...” she muttered, as she seemed to grapple with mixed emotions.

*Is something wrong?* Layla wondered, feeling ready to cry.

Just then, Chef Mona smiled brightly, hugged Layla, and patted her on her small, trembling shoulders and back.

Finally feeling comforted, Layla breathed a sigh of relief into Chef Mona's warm embrace.

* * *

“So Layla, from now on, you need to be careful around men. Got it?” Chef Mona said in a firm tone, after saying all sorts of things that Layla felt very embarrassed to hear.

As a mother of three daughters, Chef Mona was well prepared to help Layla adjust to the changes that would be coming in her life, and she wasn't holding back with her advice. Layla could barely understand most of the things she was hearing, but she felt too shy to ask any questions, so she just kept nodding.

“This is cause for congratulations, Layla, but also for concern,” Chef Mona said, looking sympathetically at her. *When beautiful flowers bloom in the field, life gets harder,* she thought, but instead of saying this to Layla, she just sighed.

Layla was a strikingly pretty girl. This hadn't been obvious when she had first arrived at Arvis, when she was malnourished and dirty, but after living with Bill for a while and eating properly, she had bloomed like one of his beautiful roses.

She still had the appearance of a cute, young girl, but as a mother of daughters, Chef Mona knew the magical swiftness with which

girls seemed to transform into women in the blink of an eye.

At least she had strong, dependable Bill Remmer to protect her. With him looking after her, it didn't seem like anything could go too wrong in her life. This thought brought the smile back to Chef Mona's face. “Whether you're at school or in town, wherever you go, you should just think of all men as scoundrels. That's basically what they are, after all.”

Layla flinched at this warning and, furrowing her brow, asked, “Even Kyle?”

“Kyle? Hmm... Well, even Kyle is going to be a man soon, so you'd better be careful around him, too.”

Chef Mona felt sorry towards the friendly Dr. Ettman for calling his son a scoundrel, but she felt it was better to be safe than sorry.

She continued to offer her advice, and soon it was time to begin preparing dinner. She stepped out of the mansion with Layla, who was carrying the little basket she had given her. She continued to shower her with warnings and advice as they walked the towards the duke's quarters.

“Oh, Layla!” Shortly after they finally parted ways, Chef Mona hurried back towards her and abruptly reached out to feel her chest.

The lazy afternoon silence was pierced by the combined sound of Layla's scream and Chef Mona's laughter.

“Hmm, yes. You really are becoming a lady,” Chef Mona said, looking compassionately at Layla's blushing face. “You're going to need some more things. I'll tell Bill to... No, no. I need to go into town this weekend anyway. You should come with me.”

“Thank you, Chef Mona,” Layla said, curtsying. “From the bottom of my heart.” She smiled at the chef, and her eyes squinted beautifully.

Gazing back at her, Chef Mona patted her on the back a few more times, then hurried off towards the mansion's kitchen.

When she was out of sight, Layla turned back towards the cottage. Her cramps were still painful, but her mood was much

improved since the morning.

Reassuring herself that she was going to be able to handle everything now, she turned a corner, then stopped dead in her tracks. Amid the soft summer breeze, she heard the unmistakable sound of Claudine's laughter. Then she heard a man's low, gentle voice as well. It was Lady Claudine and Duke Herhardt.

Flustered, she reflexively hid behind a wall. She hoped that they would go somewhere else, but the sound of their footsteps grew louder and louder as they approached the spot where she was hiding.

# Side Story 10:
## Bird of Paradise (10)

Matthias spotted the girl at once. Or rather, he spotted her clothes and hair. After seeing him and Claudine, the orphan girl that the gardener was raising had rushed behind a wall to hide. He only caught a glimpse of her fluttering skirt and blonde hair, but that was enough for him to recognize her.

Whenever he saw her, she was invariably either running away or crying. Sometimes she was running away *while* crying. Other than the mild irritation that this behavior made him feel, the girl was nothing to him. When he felt bothered by her attempts to escape him, he would pursue her, tormenting her until she cried, and that would be enough for him.

“Let's go back now,” Claudine said in a tired voice, looking up at the still-sunny sky. “It's too hot for an evening stroll.” She was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and holding a parasol, but her face was still flushed red from the heat.

Even for Matthias, who normally didn't mind the heat, it was an unpleasantly warm day. The walk had been Claudine's idea anyway, so he was perfectly happy to accept her sudden change of heart. Of course, it would have been more entertaining to go all the way to the spot where the trembling, frightened girl was hiding, but perhaps not entertaining enough to be worth the inconvenience of walking all that way in the sweltering heat.

Before walking up the steps to the mansion's entrance, he glanced back towards the spot where the girl had been hiding. Sure enough, she was running away. She was moving surprisingly fast, even though it was such a hot day and she was dressed in what appeared to be winter clothing.

Perhaps it was because of how their first encounter had gone. He had been out on a hunt in Arvis's forest, and his attention had been drawn to what he thought was a bird up in a tree, but had turned

out to be a little girl. When he was hunting, no matter how rare of a bird he found, his interest vanished as soon as he shot it. His interest in the girl was similarly limited, although of course he had no intention of shooting her. A new bird in his forest—that was all she was to him.

He stopped paying attention to the fleeing girl and entered the cool, pleasant air of the mansion with Claudine.

* * *

Bill only found out about Chef Mona's trip into town with Layla after they returned. Naturally, he heard it directly from the chatty Mona's mouth.

“Gosh, well I'll be,” he finally said, after remaining in a silent daze for a while. “Ho ho, this is... wow.” Scratching the back of his sunburnt neck, he continued to mutter similarly empty remarks.

He didn't know what to say. He had grown up with many brothers but no sisters, and as an adult he had lived as a childless widower for many years, so he had never encountered this sort of issue.

“But Mona, are you really sure that little girl is already-”

“Goodness, Bill. What do you mean, ‘already'? She's way behind the other girls her age.” Chef Mona looked at Bill with amusement, then clicked her tongue and went on. “I guess I should be more understanding. It can't be easy for a gruff widower like you to raise a daughter who suddenly appeared out of the blue.”

“Daughter? What daughter? I'm just temporarily-”

“Stop spitting that nonsense and go pick some of those roses,” she firmly said, pointing towards the mansion's rose garden.

“Roses? What for?”

“Come now, Bill, you don't even know *that?* You need to give Layla her gift.”

“Gift?”

“Yes! When your daughter first becomes a woman, it's traditional to give her a flower bouquet as a gift.”

His brow furrowed with confusion. He had spent his life growing and tending to flowers, but not once had he picked them to give as a gift. The thought of doing such a corny thing had never crossed his mind.

“I told you, she's not my daughter! I'm going to send her away, I just haven't found the right place to send her to... Ugh, if I had found a place sooner, I wouldn't have to worry about any of this.”

“Oh really? Then why don't you send her away now?” she asked, snickering.

“B-but there's nowhere for her to go, is there?”

“Come on, Bill. You said that you could never make her your daughter, and that you'll have no choice but to send her to an orphanage if there's nowhere else for her. If you haven't arranged for that yet, would you like me to contact the orphanage for you?”

He could tell that she was intentionally provoking him, but he couldn't help but feel nervous as he listened to her.

“You know, Bill, it tears me up inside to think of sending that girl, who has now become a woman, to a place where no one will protect her. Why does the world have to be so cruel?”

Seeing the uneasiness her words were provoking in him, she doubled down on her scare tactics. “And you know, that girl is getting prettier by the day. Once she fully matures she'll be a strikingly beautiful woman, but if she has an encounter with a hooligan, well then-”

“Stop it!” he shouted, unable to take any more of her goading. “You've made your point, so you can go now! My oh my, now I've really heard everything.”

“Listen to yourself, Bill. You're so angry!” she replied, chuckling. “You know what you sound like? You sound like the father of a daughter.” With that, she turned and left the garden. Her apron fluttered in the warm breeze as she went.

Bill scratched the back of his neck again as he stood in the silent garden, hovering in between rose beds. He only realized how foolishly he was acting after one of his young helpers returned and

asked, “Is something the matter, Mr. Remmer?”

The boy looked just as innocent as always, but unlike before, Bill felt wary as he looked at him. Suddenly he recalled the boy remarking that Layla was going to grow up to be a very pretty lady. At the time, Bill had paid little mind to the comment, but now it bothered him.

“Mr. Remmer...?” the helper sheepishly said, noticing the angry look that had suddenly appeared on his boss's face.

Bill took a deep breath to calm himself down, then dismissed the helper with a wave of his hand. Then he started looking at the rose beds again. After a while, he reached out to pick one, then changed his mind and kept looking, repeating this process several times.

* * *

Just like the last time she had summoned Layla, Lady Claudine once again had her gather flowers for her. It was a simple task—Layla was to pick some fresh roses from the garden and bring them to the drawing room where Claudine was waiting. Layla completed the job without difficulty. Listening to what Lady Claudine said to her after she delivered the flowers was similarly easy. However, the difficulty finally came when she saw all the roses that Lady Claudine was casting aside.

After receiving the basket of flowers from Layla, Claudine had gone through and picked out only the ones she found prettiest. It looked like the rest of the flowers were going to go to waste, and this bothered Layla. After all, Uncle Bill had put his heart and soul into growing those flowers.

As much as he complained about how much fastidious care the garden required, she knew that deep down he cherished all his flowers dearly. She had heard as much from his garden helpers. One of them had said that Mr. Remmer treated roses like people, that as far as Mr. Remmer was concerned, roses, just like people, need to receive lots of sincere love to become as beautiful as the roses in his garden.

Sure enough, Claudine left behind a large number of roses when she exited the drawing room. Layla stared mournfully at the pile of crimson outcasts. When Claudine's maid came to deliver Layla's payment, Layla impulsively asked her, “Do you think it would be all right if I take those flowers with me?”

“The roses? Sure, go ahead. I was going to throw them away anyway,” the maid replied. She then handed Layla her payment and left the room.

Alone in the drawing room, Layla awkwardly stepped towards the table, gathered up the discarded flowers, and tied them together with a ribbon from her hair. Tied together like this, they made a reasonably pretty bouquet.

As she held the bouquet to her chest, a strange feeling came to her. There were lots of roses growing around the cottage, as one would expect from the home of a gardener. She was free to pick as many of them as she wanted. She often did pick them and use them to decorate the kitchen table or the desk in her room. When they dried up, she used their petals to make potpourri pouches. Uncle Bill had gently teased her for doing this, but he had never asked her to stop.

Since she was already used to dealing with roses all the time, where had her newfound interest in them come from? Was it because they reminded her of the bouquets that her friends had been bragging about?

Mulling over these thoughts, she left the mansion. Seen in the bright sunlight, the bouquet of roses looked even prettier. She decided to think of it as a gift from Uncle Bill. After all, Uncle Bill had grown the roses, so it wasn't too much of a stretch to call them a gift from him.

She started down the forest path with a carefree gait. She had let down her hair so that she could use the ribbon to tie up the bouquet, and her golden locks bounced with her steps.

She was delighted that her cramps had subsided, and felt grateful to Chef Mona for helping her through the scary experience. She

didn't relish the thought of having to endure that discomfort every month, however. The new undergarments that Chef Mona had bought her when they went into town were also a bit uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as the cramps had been. Chef Mona had told her that it was all part of becoming a woman. She still wasn't sure what that meant, but the word woman evoked painful memories for her.

*That woman.* This was how her relatives in Lovita had referred to her mother, usually modifying the phrase with a vulgar descriptor, calling her *that damn woman, that awful woman,* or the like. As for Layla herself, when they were angry at her, they had called her *that woman's daughter.*

She could thus vividly feel the scorn and contempt contained in the word woman when they used it like that. Could her mother really have been such a bad woman as to deserve the disdainful ways they talked about her?

Recently Layla had been wondering about this more and more often, even though she could never know the true answer. What she did know, however, was that she never wanted to become a woman that people would talk about using the same disparaging language.

After reaffirming that resolution, she continued walking, but was soon stopped in her tracks by the sight of a bloody mess up ahead. She didn't have to get any closer to know what it was. It was a small, beautiful bird that the duke had killed. Suppressing the urge to scream, she backed away.

There was no group hunt scheduled today. Such days were announced in advance, and Uncle Bill always warned her about them. Did that mean that the duke was out hunting alone today?

Occasionally the duke would wander the forest alone, as if he were out on a leisurely stroll, with his horse and his gun as his only companions. On such occasions, he always seemed to shoot especially small birds.

Uncle Bill had explained that he was doing this to practice his marksmanship. Only a sharpshooter like the duke could hit such

tiny targets. Uncle Bill praised the duke's ever-improving shooting skills, but Layla didn't like thinking about it. It frightened her. When she encountered the duke by himself, he seemed like a completely different person, compared to the way he behaved with his companions. Thus, when he went out to hunt by himself, it was unlucky not just for the little birds, but for Layla as well.

Should she take a different route home? But where was the duke, anyway? She looked nervously around. Just then, a gunshot rang out. There was no more need to guess at the duke's whereabouts. He was on a nearby path, looking down at yet another bloody mess of a bird. He had just lowered his gun, and was turning his horse around, right in Layla's direction.

Before she could run away, their eyes met. Frozen stiff, she held the rose bouquet to her chest and slowly started to back away. She desperately hoped that some other noblemen would show up, but no matter how long she waited, that didn't happen.

Unfortunately for her, the duke was alone.

# Side Story 11:
## Bird of Paradise (11)

The girl started fleeing as soon as she saw him. Without hesitation, he started chasing after her. He knew it was going to be an easy chase, perhaps so easy as to be boring. Still, even an easy chase offered some enjoyment, so he didn't pass up the opportunity. After all, he had nothing else to think about at the moment.

Why was she running away? What was she afraid of?

As he rode his horse in the direction in which she was fleeing, he narrowed his eyes. For a while he had assumed that she always fled him because of the fright she had suffered at their first encounter, when he had almost shot her. It was only natural for a girl to be terrified by such an experience. However, there was something strange about the way she kept fleeing him whenever they ran into each other, more desperately each time, and it rubbed him the wrong way.

The girl was an enigma. Despite how much she feared him, whenever he had her cornered, she would glare boldly at him through her wide-open, tear-filled eyes. Thanks to such moments, he knew that the orphan girl the gardener had taken in had eyes as green as the summer forest. The fact that she was small and skinny only made her eyes stand out more conspicuously.

She seemed to have grown a lot since that first summer, though she was still just a girl.

*What's her name again?* he thought. *Layla? Yes, Layla. Layla Llewellyn, I believe.*

He continued to chase after her, intentionally making his horse move at a slow pace. Nonetheless, the gap between them quickly closed, and the fear in her eyes grew larger each time she looked back at him.

*Are those... roses?*

Just as he noticed the flowers she was holding, she tripped over a

rock and fell. Her brief scream resonated through the peaceful woods.

He brought his horse to a stop in front of the spot where she lay. The roses were scattered next to her. Some of them had been crushed in the fall. Some detached petals were tumbling away, carried by the breeze.

While he was looking at the flowers, she stood up and backed away from him. Through her disheveled hair, he saw that her little face was flushed red. Then he saw her eyes. Those piercing green eyes.

After a moment, she seemed to give up on the vain idea of trying to flee. “H-hello, Your Grace.” She lowered her head, and her hair covered her face again.

She still looked like a little girl, but her arms and legs had grown longer, making her resemble one of the fawns that he sometimes saw wandering through the woods.

From atop his horse, he looked at her for a while as she stood with her shoulders hunched nervously, then he shifted his gaze back to the roses scattered on the forest floor. Meanwhile, she backed away to the side of the path. The way she was cowering from him, half-hidden behind a tree, was no different from their other encounters, but this time it gave him a strange, unidentifiable feeling.

Then, all of a sudden, he became bored with the familiar situation again. Why should he care about her? She rubbed him the wrong way, but it was nothing to get upset about. Chasing after her now and then was an entertaining diversion, but if he no longer found it entertaining, there was no point in spending any more time on it.

Just as he was about to turn his horse around and leave, he looked closely at the fallen rose bouquet. The breeze had started blowing again, carrying the petals even farther away.

“Pick them up,” he said, pointing his hunting rifle at the crumpled bouquet. “They're yours, aren't they?”

As she stared blankly at him, her green eyes filled once again with tears. He gazed into her eyes for quite a long time. As he did, he grew even more bored of the summer afternoon.

He thus decided to get down from his horse. Since his pastime was no longer entertaining him, he was going to bring an end to it.

He picked up the rose bouquet, walked towards where the girl was hiding behind the tree, and handed it to her politely, but with no more courtesy than necessary. It was exactly the way he behaved towards Arvis employees.

The girl's face clouded with confusion as she reflexively accepted the bouquet, but he paid this no mind. He then turned and left the flustered girl behind.

On his way back to the mansion, he shot a few more birds. It was a decent hunt for an ordinary afternoon. As he was walking through the rose garden, he saw the gardener, Bill Remmer. This was also an ordinary occurrence. The encounter veered out of the realm of the ordinary, however, when the usually quiet gardener called out to him.

“Excuse me, Your Grace.”

Matthias stood and faced him with his arms behind his back.

“I was just wondering, Your Grace... would it be all right if I took a few of those roses over there?” Bill asked, pointing with uncharacteristic hesitancy at the flowerbed where the most precious roses were growing, roses which Matthias's mother and grandmother especially cherished.

“Yes, of course,” Matthias casually replied. “Take as many as you want.”

After giving this indifferent yet generous response, he continued walking towards the mansion. After walking only a few paces, however, he looked back towards the gardener, who was now hesitantly approaching the flowerbed.

“Oh, Mr. Remmer.”

The large man flinched at the sound of the duke's voice, and awkwardly stood up straight.

Matthias thought for a moment, then said, “Never mind.”

He had suddenly grown curious about how long the orphan girl was going to be staying at Arvis. He recalled that when she first arrived, the gardener had said that she would only be staying temporarily. However, he had thought better of asking the gardener about it. After all, she was no different from the countless other Arvis employees that served him. There was no reason why he should be interested in the details of her life.

He left the garden, and forgot about the girl.

* * *

The following summer, Duke Herhardt returned to Arvis once again, but he didn't chase after the girl in the forest anymore. The year after that, in keeping with the family tradition, he went to the Royal Military Academy, and was then commissioned as an officer.

While he was serving on the overseas war front, he no longer spent his summers in Arvis. The girl, who had meant nothing to him from the start, vanished from his thoughts entirely. There was no place for such meaningless memories in the life of the perfect Duke Herhardt.

This remained true until one fateful day in the summer after he returned from the war front, while he was passing through the verdant waves of foliage lining Platanus Road.

* * *

Layla buried the roses along with the last dead bird she found, a pretty waterfowl whose ankle still bore the colored string she had tied to it the previous summer.

After digging a fairly deep hole, she carefully placed the bird's cold, bloody corpse inside, and next to it she placed the bouquet. Many of the blossoms had been crushed as she fell on them, but about half the roses were still intact and beautiful. After hesitating for a moment, she picked up the trowel and thoroughly filled in the hole with dirt.

She never would have imagined that the duke would pick up the bouquet and hand it to her, especially with such politeness. In that moment, he seemed just like the Duke Herhardt that everyone else knew. It was a strange, wondrous experience for her. It felt like she was finally getting to meet the Duke Herhardt that everyone at Arvis always praised.

As he held the bouquet out to her, she had held her breath, expecting that he was going to find some other way to torment her, but he didn't. After handing her the bouquet, he simply turned and left.

Only then was she able to relax. Then, she suddenly felt embarrassed that she had been excitedly pretending that Claudine's discarded roses were a gift to her. As she carried the bouquet back to the cottage, the walk seemed to take much longer than usual.

Thus she knew that she couldn't keep the roses. She made up her mind about this as she was retrieving the gloves and trowel with which to bury the birds the duke had killed. She went back into her room and took the bouquet from her desk, then buried it along with the dead bird and the rest of her memories of the encounter with the duke. After this, she ran back to the cottage faster than usual, repeating over and over her futile prayer that the duke would lose interest in hunting.

Just as she was about to open the cottage's front door, she was startled by a deep, booming voice saying, “Looks like you've been wandering all over the forest again today!”

She turned and saw Uncle Bill sitting on his chair on the porch, looking at her.

“Yes,” he continued, “You're still a child. You're still a little girl.”

His words sounded reproachful, but his tone was friendly and warm.

She set down the gloves and trowel and hurried over to him. Just as she was about to sit down in the chair next to his, she stopped. There was a bouquet of roses on the chair.

“Uncle Bill?”

He surreptitiously turned his head towards the chair.

“What is this? Did you bring this here?” she asked.

“Oh, well... yeah, I did.” Chewing on the end of an unlit cigarette, he let out a sigh, then looked at her. “You can have it, if you uh... if you want.”

“It's for me? Really? Is it my gift?”

“Gift? Come on. It's just something I yanked from the ground.”

He was acting calm, but she was already deeply moved.

She paced ecstatically back and forth on the porch, hugging the bouquet, which was practically as big as her torso. She held it in the sunlight and gazed at it, then went back in the shade and looked at it again. She gently stroked the soft petals, smiling brightly.

As Bill watched her, he forgot all about his embarrassment over the gift and laughed heartily. He wondered at how she could be so delighted by such a simple gesture, but even if he didn't understand it, he was happy to see her happy.

“But Uncle Bill, these are Dowager and Lady Herhardt's favorite type of rose. Is it okay that you picked so many of them?” she asked, sitting down next to him with the bouquet still in her arms.

He blinked a few times, then, suddenly feeling embarrassed, shouted, “Oh, listen to you, kiddo! You're always getting worried over nothing!”

“I was just-”

“Don't worry, I'm not going to be fired for picking a few roses.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do you think I would lie to you?”

“No! I didn't mean to suggest that!” She shook her head vigorously as she held the bouquet tighter. “Thank you, Uncle Bill. They're so pretty,” she said, beaming at him as she held back her tears.

She really felt like she could forget about the other roses and the birds she had buried, now that she had received such a big, beautiful gift, a gift that was truly intended for her and her alone.

She buried her face in the bouquet and slowly breathed in its

sweet fragrance. As she did so, she gradually stopped feeling like she was going to cry.

She still didn't know exactly what it meant that she had become a woman, but she wasn't frightened about it anymore. She felt like everything was going to turn out all right. Her future now seemed rosy and sweet, just like Uncle Bill's gift.

That evening, the two of them stayed out on the porch longer than usual. Bill mostly acted the same as always, but he did reach out and pat Layla on the head a few times. The roughness of his touch made the gesture feel even more tender to her. She laughed a lot throughout the evening.

That night, she discovered that the roses he had given her had no thorns. When she untied the string and unwrapped the newspaper from around their stems to put them into a vase, she was surprised to find the stems completely smooth. He had gone to the trouble of clipping off each and every thorn. Somehow, she felt as moved by this as by the whole gift.

The summer soon came to an end. The duke left Arvis, and the forest was restored to a state of peace. Layla, finally feeling at ease, grew up quickly amid that forest. It was the magical swiftness with which girls turn into women, just as Chef Mona had predicted.

Layla's days were calm and peaceful from that day onwards, until the summer when the duke returned.

* * *

As Layla finished reminiscing about those long-past days, her eyes settled on the book containing the rose petal.

The roses Uncle Bill gave her had withered over time, but her memory of them was still fresh in her mind. She knew that memory would always remain beautiful, because it was the memory of a gift that showed Uncle Bill loved her. Thus she knew that, although the rose Matthias gave her would also wither, her memory of it would also stay with her forever as a part of her life. Not the memory of the crushed bouquet she had to bury with the bird, but the memory

of the beautiful rose that he surreptitiously stuck in her hair one night.

She slowly closed and opened her eyes, and could feel tears starting to form in them. Just as she was hopping down from the windowsill, she heard a knock at the door. She opened it and saw Dowager Herhardt's maid on the other side.

After curtsying respectfully to the duchess, the maid said, “Dowager and Lady Herhardt would like to see you, Your Grace. Please come with me.”

# Side Story 12:
## Bird of Paradise (12)

The teatime with the House of Herhardt's new duchess and the two former duchesses was peaceful enough, but a little awkward. The conversation proceeded smoothly for the most part, but a few times the three women didn't know what else to say. At these moments the sound of the babbling fountain and singing birds felt oppressively loud.

Layla set down her cup, being careful not to make a sound as she did so. She wasn't yet able to fully match the graceful movements of the former duchesses, who handled every object with a feather-light touch, but she had at least improved to the point where Elise was no longer scowling at her all the time.

Katharina looked into Layla's eyes and flashed a quiet smile, saying, “I think you finally seem like a proper duchess.”

Surprisingly, Elise readily agreed. “Yes indeed.”

Layla and Katharina both looked at Elise in shock.

“She has truly become an elegant noblewoman,” Elise went on. “I continue to be pleasantly surprised by her gracefulness each time I run into her.”

As she turned to look at Layla, Elise had a smile on her lips as bright as the sunlight filling the greenhouse, but an almost chilly calmness in her eyes.

She glanced down at the roses adorning the table, then looked up at her daughter-in-law again and asked, “Isn't that right, Layla?”

Flustered by the question, Layla couldn't help but blush childishly, but she still managed to maintain her composure.

Elise quietly clicked her tongue as she lifted her cup to take a sip of tea. Layla was not the daughter-in-law she had hoped for. Elise had no illusions about this. However, she was determined not to let her dissatisfaction show. She saw this as the only way to preserve the family's dignity, as well as her own.

Even if Layla could never be the queen of high society, perhaps she could at least learn to behave like a passable noblewoman. Layla's behavior at this teatime made this expectation seem reasonable, but when Layla was with Matthias, she always seemed to revert back to her old ways. However, Elise knew there was no point in worrying about that.

The biggest obstacle to turning Layla into a dignified duchess was Matthias himself. He seemed very resistant to the thought of removing all traces of his wife's former identity—that is, her identity as Arvis's child, Layla Llewellyn. If he wanted to preserve some of Layla Llewellyn within Duchess Layla von Herhardt, then that was how it was going to be. When it came to Layla, he never let anything get in his way.

“See, Layla? Even Elise, picky as she is, recognizes your merits. You've clearly been working very hard,” Katharina said, deftly shifting the mood. She then gestured to a maid who was standing by.

The maid briefly left the room, and came back carrying a giftwrapped box. Much to Layla's surprise, the maid placed it on the table in front of her.

“What's this…?” Layla asked, looking with widened eyes at the former duchesses.

“Open it. It's a present from us to you,” Elise replied in a languid tone.

Layla hesitated for a moment, then untied the ribbon around the box. Then she carefully removed the lid, and inside found what looked like a frame wrapped in paper.

As soon as she lifted away the paper, she froze, like a wind-up toy whose spring had run down.

The frame contained a photograph of the Herhardt family along with all the Arvis employees. Layla scanned the faces, and quickly found the one she was looking for. On the far-left end of the crowd stood Bill Remmer, her beloved father, looking irritated to have been dragged into the picture.

“I found that when I was searching for a place to put the photograph of you and Felix,” Dowager Herhardt said, looking warmly at her granddaughter-in-law, who was teary-eyed and speechless.

Portraits of the new duchess and of the duke's successor had recently been hung in the mansion's gallery, along with a photograph of the two together. Katharina had been surveying all the works in that room, ruminating on the changing times, when she had discovered the photograph in the lowest compartment of a display cabinet.

“We were keeping that photograph as a record of the family's history, but I realized that it's the only time Bill Remmer's face was captured on film. He always shunned newfangled things like cameras, as you know.”

“But is it really all right for me to have this?” Layla asked.

Katharina laughed, seeing that Layla was already clutching the frame against her chest. Elise also chuckled at the sight.

“Of course. We're giving it to you. After all, even in your possession, it's still part of our family's history.”

“Thank you... Thank you so much,” Layla said, sniffling a little as she lowered her head. “I can't tell you how much this means to me. Thank you.”

Layla’s difficulty controlling her emotions at this touching gift were unbecoming of a duchess, but Elise decided not to scold her for this. Fortunately, Layla got a grip on her feelings soon enough not to burst into tears.

She took off her glasses and firmly rubbed her eyes. When she put her glasses back on, she was smiling brightly again.

Even if Layla wasn't a perfect daughter-in-law, she was far from being a bad daughter-in-law. Elise had no trouble admitting this. What she lacked in elegance, she made up for in sincerity. Elise's tolerance for her had increased even more when she realized that her smile looked just like Felix's.

“You're going to need to work on your etiquette a bit more,

Layla," Elise said. Even as she was speaking firmly like this, her voice remained as soft as the gentle babbling of the fountain.

Layla looked up at her with a start.

"If you show such excessive politeness to your own family, you can hardly be called a proper noblewoman."

"Family…?"

"Yes, family. You're a Herhardt now, dear. We're family."

*Family.* Layla's lips quivered as she silently mouthed the word.

Elise once again chuckled as she watched her. "I admit I have found it hard to fully understand you, or even to like you. I don't expect this to change in the future, either," she said, deciding not to sugar coat the truth.

Layla meekly nodded.

"But Layla, you're the wife of my son and the mother of my grandchild. As such, I will respect and accept you. You are a member of the Herhardt family, and even if you have a long way to go before you can be called a proper duchess, you clearly have certain merits."

Elise was calmly conveying her honest opinion of her daughter-in-law, after a year of observing her.

"While I still don't understand Matthias's decision to send you to college, I must say, it's highly gratifying to know that you have outperformed the sons of all the women who spoke ill of our family. Way to go."

"Oh... Yes!" Layla replied, her dazed expression giving way to a smile again. "I'm going to try my best next semester too. I promise."

"I'm sure you will. I look forward to hearing about it. But Layla, you have another merit besides your erudition. Don't you want to continue exercising it as well?"

"Another merit?"

"Yes, perhaps your biggest merit—your ability to bear a child as wonderful as Felix."

Because of Elise's nonchalant tone, it took Layla some time to grasp the meaning of what she was hearing.

Katharina, who had been quietly listening with a slight smile on her face, chimed in.

“Yes, Layla, wouldn't bearing another child like that benefit you as well?”

Even as the former duchesses were sharing their earnest hopes with Layla, they each remained coldly elegant in their bearing.

Layla's mind was in a daze, but she knew exactly how she felt about this subject, and that gave her the courage to respond. “To tell the truth, I would like more children too... It's my husband who feels otherwise. He says that Felix is enough for him.”

Gazing impassively at her daughter-in-law, Elise casually spread open her fan. “What difference does that make, Layla? You're the one who has the babies.”

“Pardon?”

“The only choice a man has is whether or not to do the thing that leads to that. And judging from the fact that the duke's morning tea always seems to be delivered to the duchess's bedroom, it seems that he has already made that choice.”

“Uh...” Layla muttered, at a loss for words. She couldn't believe that Lady Herhardt was able to talk about such an embarrassing subject so casually.

The well-mannered Dowager Herhardt was no different in that regard. “Even if he says he doesn't want it, I'm sure that if you do bear another child, he will fulfill all his duties as a father. Don't you think so, Elise?” she asked, looking slyly at her daughter-in-law.

“Of course. I have no doubt of it,” Elise replied, slowly shifting her gaze to the young duchess's blushing face.

The three duchesses' conversation then quickly returned to ordinary matters. As Elise and Katharina talked about the party that was coming up in a few weeks, it was as if they had completely forgotten about the subject which moments earlier had made Layla feel like she was going to faint with embarrassment.

As Layla listened to the two women's conversation amid the babbling of the fountain and the warbling of the birds, it struck her

that Matthias was just like his mother and grandmother.

* * *

Hearing the sound of someone quietly knocking, Matthias looked at the bedroom door. After a moment, there was some more knocking, a little louder this time. Only then did he realize where the sound was coming from—not from the door that opened out into the hallway, but from the secret door to the passageway connecting the duke and duchess's bedrooms.

He closed the document file he had been perusing and set it down on the table, then stared at the secret door, his head askew. Frustrated at the lack of response, Layla decided to simply open the door. “So you are in here. Why didn't you respond to my knocking?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at her husband, who was leaning back in his chair.

“Why did you bother knocking, when you and I are the only ones who use that door?” he retorted.

“Well, isn't it impolite to burst in on someone?” Now that she thought about it, she realized that he had never knocked before entering her bedroom from the secret passageway. However, this only made her firmer in her conviction that knocking was the proper thing to do. “Whatever *you* are, Matty, *I'm* a lady.”

When he heard his wife make this witty comment, he laughed, and his laughter blended with the waltz coming from the phonograph.

Only then did she start smiling and enter the room. His eyes remained fixed on her as she softly stepped towards him.

“Looks like you're quite busy again today, huh?” she asked, looking uneasily at the stack of documents on the table, and back at him. It was clear that she wanted to talk to him about something.

“Yep.”

His terse response transformed her uneasiness into embarrassment. He gazed at her for a moment, enjoying the flustered look on her face, then he let a smile crack through,

revealing that he had been joking.

“I *was* busy. But I'm done now,” he said, uncrossing his legs and standing up to face her straight on. “What's on your mind, Layla?”

Even though it was clear that he was ready to listen to her, she was having trouble broaching the topic she had come to discuss. She paced around next to him for a while.

Seeing that his wife seemed to need some time to gather her thoughts, he walked over to the window and casually leaned on the wall next to it. After the white muslin curtains swayed in and out a few times in the breeze, she finally walked up to him with a look of determination on her face. Standing with her hands behind her back and her head held high, she looked quite bold.

“You said that I can be as greedy as I like. Did you really mean that?” she asked. The serious look on her face suggested that she had something big in mind.

“Of course I did,” he replied, nodding with the mellowness of a predator with a full belly.

Looking up at him, she decided to hesitate no further. “I'd like to have another child. I really want one.”

“Another child?”

“Yes. I want to have another baby.”

“Layla...” he muttered, furrowing his brow slightly.

Paying no mind to his reluctance, she firmly said, “Let me have it. I want us to have another baby.”

# Side Story 13:
## Bird of Paradise (13)

Layla showed none of her usual embarrassment as she looked into Matthias's eyes. He chuckled as he observed the sharp contrast between the ridiculous thing she had just said, and the serious, almost scholarly look on her face.

She frowned at him, annoyed that he was laughing at her. Then she took a step towards him and said, “No matter how you look at it, it's absurd for us only to have a son who looks like you. We need a daughter who looks like me, too. Then things would be fair.”

“What if things don't go your way?” he asked, uncrossing his arms and putting his hands to her cheeks. “You already bore Felix, what if you bore another son? Then you'll have to deal with twice the absurdity.”

“No,” she replied. “I think you'll manage to father a daughter this time. My intuition tells me so.”

“What sort of sophistry is that?”

“Duke Herhardt always gets what Duke Herhardt wants, right? If you want a daughter, I think we'll have one.” Her eyes remained clear and bright even as she made these brash pronouncements. “Won't you do that for me? Won't you want a daughter? Just think how cute little Leah will be. She already has a name, a name her father gave her. All that's left is for her to be conceived and born.” She gently placed her hands on top of his, which were still cupping her cheeks.

He gazed deeply into her eyes, showing neither a positive nor a negative reaction to her request.

“Do you really dislike children so much?” she asked, pouting ostentatiously.

The clumsiness of her acting made it all the more endearing to him.

“To tell you the truth, Layla, it doesn't matter to me how many

children we have," he said, calmly looking at his reflection in her eyes. "For the sake of the family, more children would be a good thing. And you can be sure that I will fulfill all my fatherly duties towards any children we have. Those things are true regardless of whether I like or dislike children in general. But you have completely different expectations, don't you? I'm not sure if I can live up to your expectations if we have more children than just Felix."

*And Layla, that scares me*, he thought, not daring to say the words out loud.

The concept of children was still somewhat vague and alien to him. Of course, this was not true of Felix. He loved his son. Felix was the embodiment of the hope that helped Layla make it through her illness and deliver a healthy baby. He was also the most significant reason why Layla was being accepted as a duchess. When Matthias looked at Felix's face, which so resembled his own, and saw the smile on it, which so resembled Layla's smile, he knew that there was no other word to describe what he felt than *love*. Even if his love was a little different from what Layla wanted, it was love nonetheless.

But another child? He wasn't sure if he would feel the same way towards a new child as he did towards Felix. If it hadn't been for the war, and his dramatic parting and reunion with Layla, perhaps he would have felt as indifferently towards Felix as he did towards other children.

Even so, he would be able to build and maintain his life's balance and order. He would be able to treat everyone besides Layla the way he always had. But as for his Layla...

"Matthias?"

He was roused from his thoughts by the sound of Layla tenderly calling his name.

"Instead of focusing on the uncertainties of the future, could you just think about me?" She slowly lowered her arms and wrapped them around his waist. "Here's what I want: I want to make a baby

with you in the midst of our warm, peaceful love. And while the baby is growing inside of me and being born, I want you to be there with me. I might want that time with you even more than I want the baby itself, since we couldn't be together when Felix was born."

As she listened to herself talk, she realized that she wasn't painting herself as the best mother, but she didn't want to hide her desire.

"I also want to have the experience of announcing to everyone that I'm pregnant, and hearing their congratulations. I want to be able to show off my expanding belly without reserve, and brag about how much the baby is growing. I want to grumble to you about morning sickness, and pester you about all the weird food cravings I'll get. And then, when the time comes for the baby to be born, I want our whole family to be there to welcome the little one to the world. I want a less lonely experience than last time." Her eyes started to tear up, and her voice was shaking, but she was still able to smile. "I want you to give me that experience, as your gift to me. All right?"

* * *

Matthias von Herhardt had lost. He accepted this fact with a long kiss. There was no other response he could give. Nor did he have any desire to find another response.

Beginning at the window side, their kiss momentarily stopped after they moved to the bed. Layla lay breathing heavily in the middle of the bed, waiting, but for some reason Matthias wasn't approaching her. Instead, he just sat on the edge of the bed, gazing at her as he let out a quiet laugh that sounded more like a sigh.

"Somehow I feel like I'm being used as an instrument of your desire," he said, furrowing his brow and cocking his head.

Detecting a hint of playfulness in his soft voice, she casually laughed and sat up. "Yep, you're right. How does it feel to be used, Your Grace?" She then proceeded to skillfully remove his tie and unbutton his shirt.

“Do with me what you will, Your Majesty,” he replied, watching her little hands as they diligently made their way down his shirt buttons. “I will gladly obey you, my queen.”

She looked at him with slightly narrowed eyes. He looked most charming at times like this, when he was wearing a crooked, arrogant smile.

“Fine, I will.” She smiled tenderly at him as she unbuttoned the last button and removed his shirt. “I'll use you to my heart's content.”

To demonstrate that she really meant what she had said, she then pulled him onto the bed with a forceful grip. Of course, her strength was no match for such a large, muscular man, but he passively moved along with her as she tugged his body this way and that.

After pausing for a moment, she leaned him against a pile of cushions and, straddling his lap, she pulled her nightgown up over her head and tossed it aside. She wasn't wearing any underwear, so this left her completely nude.

As his gaze slowly traveled from her bare breasts down to between her legs, he snickered and patted her head. Enjoying his touch, she allowed his hands to explore her body. She felt quite embarrassed, but she didn't care.

Breathing passionately, she kissed a spot on his neck where she could feel his pulse. Then she slowly kissed his collarbone, his shoulders, and the scars below them.

She should have been used to the scars by now, but somehow whenever the two of them were intimate, she felt the same way she had felt the first time she saw them.

For a while, all she could do was stare at them in amazement.

*My goodness…*

She hurriedly started removing the rest of his clothes and checking his body for more scars. By the time she reached the scar he had earned in the battle that led to the false report of his death, she was crying like a baby.

Just as she had done that first night, she gently put her lips to the

scar and kissed it repeatedly. Even as tears poured from her eyes, she didn't stop. She knew that her kisses wouldn't erase the scar, but she wanted to comfort him however she could.

As she continued to passionately kiss him, she suddenly realized that the hatred and resentment she had harbored towards him for so long were now completely gone. He had returned, and she had forgiven him. That night, there was no hate or sadness between them, only love, as they began their fresh start together.

She finished her ritualistic kissing by pressing her lips against the gunshot wound on his firm arm, breathing her warm breath onto it as she kissed it.

*How far have we come in our journey together since that night?* she wondered.

Pondering this question, she looked up into his eyes. She enjoyed the sound of his breathing, which was no longer calm. She also enjoyed the look of blatant lust in his eyes, clearly visible even in the shadows.

She wrapped her slender arms around his neck. As their bare chests touched, they could feel each other's warmth and heartbeats.

After pulling him closer and giving him a few flirtatious pecks on the cheek, she whispered, “You're really pretty.”

Catching his breath, he furrowed his brow as he looked at his wife. The innocent, carefree grin on her face stood in contrast to the way she was driving him half-wild.

“The night I first saw your body, I was amazed by how pretty it was. You were very frightening, but also very pretty,” she said.

“Don't you think that's a strange compliment to be giving your husband?”

“Not at all. It's how I've felt about you from then until now. It was the first time in my life I'd ever seen someone so pretty. Of course, it was also the first time I'd encountered someone so mean, so detestable.” As she said this, she gently kissed him, like a bird lovingly rubbing its beak against his cheek.

Eventually he gave up and laughed, saying, “It's certainly lucky

that your favorite part of me is unscathed."

Looking closely at him, she tilted her head questioningly. "Do you think this is the only part of you I like?" she asked, firmly holding his face in her hot hands.

She looked very sensual, with her whole body flushed red and a serious look on her face.

He felt like she was really going to drive him to abject wildness, but he decided not to tell her this. He didn't want her to know. In this moment, he wanted everything about her to belong to him and him alone.

"Well, yes," he replied, slowly nodding.

She flinched slightly at his response.

"That is, I used to think that," he added.

Her cheeks turned an even brighter shade of red as his nasty remark reminded her of an earlier memory.

*"Don't cry. Your favorite part is unscathed."*

He had said this just as casually on that first night, when she was crying over the sight of the scars covering his body.

She had been about to angrily ask him how he could make such a vulgar comment at a time like this, when she saw that he was pointing to his face. She was fairly certain that he had wanted her to think he was talking about a different part of his body, but she felt silly asking him about this. Thus all she could do was clench her fists and punch him. And she did so again tonight.

While he was being hit with a barrage of weak punches on his shoulders and chest, he undid his pants and lowered them down. When she finally noticed him doing this, she flinched, but as always, he wasn't shy about showing her his desire.

*Why am I feeling embarrassed right now? Shouldn't he be feeling embarrassed instead?* she asked herself. However, the futile question soon vanished from her mind.

He tugged on her neck to pull her towards him and started kissing her passionately. At the same time, she felt his bulk filling her up. She reflexively tried to pull back, but he had already

wrapped both his legs securely around her.

For a moment, she stared blankly into space. Then, with a feeling of sweet resignation, she looked at him again and whispered, “Matty...” No other words came to her mind, so, in between passionate moans, she repeated his name several more times: “Matty... Matty… Matty...” She felt embarrassed to hear herself, but she had no desire to hide her feelings. Before long, however, she lost the ability even to say his name.

Her green eyes clouded with bliss as his rhythmic thrusting jostled her to her core.

# Side Story 14:
## Bird of Paradise (14)

After using Matthias to her heart's content, Layla fell asleep in his arms. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she passed out from exhaustion. The distinction didn't matter to him, however—he was just disappointed that she wasn't still awake.

He remained in the same position for a while, holding her soft, slack body. As her body gradually cooled down, she burrowed deeper into his embrace. He found the way that she was unconsciously seeking warmth so endearing, he momentarily forgot about his lingering desire.

After gently kissing her smooth forehead, he crossed his arms and hugged her tighter. Even now, he was occasionally overwhelmed by the feelings she aroused in him. Still holding her in his arms, he had no idea how to deal with these feelings.

For a moment he felt silly for harboring such ardent desire towards this woman who was already his wife, but he quickly decided it wasn't silly at all. After all, he knew better than anyone that his desire for Layla had been out of the realm of the ordinary from the start, and he had no wish to tame it. Not that he could tame it even if he wanted to, anyway.

As the night wore on, Layla's regular breathing permeated the deepening darkness. He leaned on his arm and gazed at her. He caressed the soft, wispy hairs at the edge of her hairline. When he did, her long eyelashes fluttered briefly. Grinning at her unconscious reaction, he stooped down and kissed her eyelids, which were still slightly wet.

He liked feeling her body gently stir as she continued to sleep in his arms. He also liked the feeling of the bedsheets, warmed from their body heat, and of the midsummer night breeze blowing in through the open window.

He touched his lips to the faint traces of tears left on her face.

Soon his breathing became more passionate, as did his touch as he traced the beautiful curve of her spine.

His feelings about having more children remained the same as before, and yet, he was seized with a desire to see her at the height of pregnancy with his child inside of her. Due to the war, he had only had a short time with her when she was pregnant with Felix. At the time, his concern over her health had driven him to feel indifferent about whether the fetus survived or not. Nonetheless, he had felt very pleased by the sight of her round belly and the thought that she was carrying his child. Pleased enough that his mind had been cleared of self-loathing over the monster that he had become.

*If only we could relive those moments again, but without pain and suffering this time…*

His passion was now reaching its height. He firmly wrapped his arms around her slender waist. As he recalled the delightful plumpness of her belly when she was pregnant, he felt indignant that the war had taken away the time he should have shared with her.

Looking at her now-flat belly, he started to wonder what it would look like as it grew and grew. When he had seen her pregnant during the war, her belly had already been big enough that it was hard for her to move around with her petite frame. How much bigger would it get when she was full-term? While that was happening, what thoughts would she think? What would her laughter sound like? How beautiful would she become?

As question after question filled his mind, his hands caressed her body with increasing passion. He recognized that he had been arrogant in thinking of this type of desire as something to fulfill and forget about.

Even after the days had passed in which he had been obsessed with the thought of possessing her completely, his desire for her remained ardent, at least when they were making love. He could escape the feeling of helplessness when he bore as deep into her as

possible, overwhelming his senses by jostling her body to its limit.

When his slowly moving hands reached her breasts and grasped them, she let out a quiet moan and opened her eyes. As she stared at him, still half-asleep, he stared right back at her and slowly tightened his grip on her breasts. Her delicate skin was already covered with marks that he had left while they were making love earlier. As he left these new, bright-red hand marks on her breasts, his breath quickened with sadistic pleasure.

“It's all right, keep sleeping,” he whispered, before kissing each of her pleasingly firm nipples. “I'm not doing anything.”

Because he was whispering so gently, it took her a moment to realize how heated and passionate his movements were. By the time this occurred to her, he was already on top of her.

“You're lying,” she whispered, giggling, as she narrowed her eyes at him. Her body was still slack, but her eyes were now wide awake.

“Yep,” he agreed, sitting up.

She tensed up with belated trepidation, but he had already situated himself between her legs.

“I was lying,” he admitted, looking at her with a blank expression. He then proceeded to lightly kiss her knees.

His queen accepted her servant's obeisance by letting her rigid body relax. Still firmly holding her waist, he pushed deeper and deeper into her. Each time she squirmed or gasped, his desire for her grew more intense.

Pressing gently down on her pale, sweaty belly, he pushed inside more forcefully. Swaying uncontrollably, she moaned and reached her arms out towards him. Her tear-filled eyes seemed full of a desperate longing for something as they stared at him.

Moaning hoarsely, he leaned towards her and gave her what she was craving. Her skin felt warm and moist against his. The inside of her felt even more so.

“I love you,” he whispered, his sweaty brow pressed lightly against hers.

He now understood what the strange feeling was that came to him whenever they stared deeply into each other's eyes. It was love. He could try to ignore or deny it all he wanted, but it was a feeling that followed him around as persistently as his shadow.

“I love you, Layla.”

Thus, he could finally say it without reserve.

“I love you. Layla, my Layla, I love you.”

* * *

The long, slow-moving days of summer passed by with an almost cruel swiftness. Once the dog days were over and the heat began to subside, the Schulter River gradually deepened in color. Even though summer was still in full swing, this color shift was a harbinger of the fast-approaching autumn. At times, this brought Layla to the point of tears, but for the most part she accepted the flow of time.

As the seasons progressed, so did Felix's growth. The more he developed, the more he resembled not just Matthias, but Layla as well. She couldn't help but be amazed by this, even though she knew it was perfectly natural. Just as Felix's growth progressed along with the seasons, her love for him increased along with his growth.

Just when she had gotten comfortable enough to swim in the Schulter without fear, Matthias left for a short trip to Ratse, to work on a newly-expanded business venture there.

There were only a few weeks of summer break left, so Layla could have accompanied him back to the capital, but instead she decided to stay with Felix, enjoying what remained of her summer at Arvis until Matthias returned.

Naturally, this decision was most welcomed by the former duchesses, and especially by Elise von Herhardt. Her love for her grandson was exceptional, but recently she had disconcerted Layla by referring to Felix as the true masterpiece of the House of Herhardt.

*“What's the matter? Are you sad that your son is inheriting your husband's nickname?”* she asked Layla in a sharp tone. *“Think about it, Layla. Your husband was so blinded by his passion for you that he faked his death so that he could be with you. How can we continue to call him the family's masterpiece after a stunt like that?”*

Feeling her mother-in-law's intense gaze, Layla was at a loss for words.

*“If your son threatened you in the way mine threatened me, you'd understand how I feel.”* Amused by her own remark, Elise smiled for a moment, then grew serious again. *“No, no. That would never happen, would it?”* she asked her grandson, who was sitting on her lap. Smiling tenderly at him, she said, *“No it won't, Felix. You're going to become the true masterpiece of the House of Herhardt, aren't you?”*

Despite being unable to understand the meaning of her words, Felix happily nodded in response, which delighted his grandmother and great-grandmother.

Day after day, the remained of the Arvis summer continued to pass by without Matthias. As the day of parting approached, the former duchesses grew more and more possessive of Felix, and Layla found herself getting less and less time alone with him. She even started to feel sorry for her son, who got along merrily with anyone, showing no trace of shyness. She giggled as it occurred to her that this was one respect in which he most certainly did not take after his father.

Bored of studying in preparation for the coming semester, she had gone for a walk, and was now on her way back. She had wanted to bring Felix along with her, but he was preoccupied with a new toy his grandmother had bought him.

As she started down the shadowy forest path, Layla look off her wide-brimmed straw hat. Her bangs fluttered in the breeze, which was cool and refreshing by this point in the late summer. This breeze carried her back in her mind to a summer many years earlier, when the forest was similarly peaceful.

Matthias, newly commissioned as an army officer, had gone off to the overseas war front. It was Layla's first summer at Arvis that hadn't begun with a lively homecoming ceremony for Duke Herhardt home, so it felt a little strange. Even Uncle Bill, who never showed any enthusiasm towards the homecoming ceremony, conceded that it felt unusual to begin the summer without it.

For this reason, Layla decided not to admit how much she had been looking forward to a summer without the duke, or how happy she was now that it had arrived. She intended to keep those feelings to herself as she enjoyed her long-awaited peaceful summer.

It really seemed like it was going to work out. She explored the woods to her heart's content. She observed the migratory birds as they returned right on schedule. She filled her notebook with descriptions and sketches of the flowers she found. She picked countless wild fruits to use for making jam.

She also grew quite a lot that summer. She lost her lanky, long-limbed appearance as her body filled in, and soon she looked just like a curvy, well-proportioned young lady. Boys had started to make a practice of waiting outside the gates of Gillis Girls' School, hoping to catch a glimpse of her leaving school, but she still had no interest in them.

That summer, she looked like a woman, but she still felt like a child inside. It was a peaceful, beautiful summer, filled with joyous memories. However, there was the occasional moment when, partway down the forest path, she suddenly stopped in her tracks, just as was happening today. At such moments, she would stare at the quiet path for a long time. A strange feeling would rise inside of her, and she would tilt her head slightly. Then the feeling would pass and she would go on her merry way.

Just as she did back in that first peaceful summer, today she once again stared quietly at the path leading to the Schulter River. White dust rose from her shoe as she tapped her foot on the ground.

After standing there for a short while longer, she continued walking towards the river.

*Should I give him a call?*

She giggled as this silly thought came to her mind. Putting her hat back on, she began to retrace her steps, a little faster than before.

* * *

Kyle spotted the duke in an unexpected place. He was on his way back to his father's clinic after accompanying him on a house call. Kyle wasn't yet a doctor himself, but he was a highly capable assistant.

The car carrying Duke Herhardt stopped in front of the hotel across the street from Dr. Ettman's clinic. Kyle wouldn't have noticed the car, but the familiar movements of the man stepping out of it caught his attention.

“What's the matter?” Dr. Ettman asked, smiling, as he got out of his car.

“Oh, nothing. Just noticing the nice weather,” Kyle replied, trying to distract his father before he could notice what was going on across the street.

The summer that Duke Herhardt had returned to Arvis, the Ettmans had left Karlsbar. No one had forced them to do this, but most had seen it as inevitable.

Dr. Ettman had recommended another competent doctor to take over for him as the House of Herhardt's family doctor, and then had moved to Ratse, where he opened a bigger clinic than the one he had run in Karlsbar. The plan was for Kyle to join his father at this clinic once he graduated from medical school.

Fortunately, Dr. Ettman was convinced by his son's comment about the weather, and proceeded into the clinic without further question. Breathing a sigh of relief, Kyle looked across the street again. At almost the same instant, Duke Herhardt looked towards him.

With the quiet street between them, the two men locked eyes.

# Side Story 15:
## Bird of Paradise (15)

The two men stared calmly at each other for some time, not averting their eyes, and yet not quite acknowledging each other either.

The duke finally brought an end to this impromptu staring contest by giving a brief nod in Kyle's direction. The gesture was polite and dispassionate. It was similar to way the duke used to acknowledge Kyle back when he was nothing more than the family doctor's son to him.

Kyle nodded back, showing similar courtesy and indifference, much like how he used to greet the duke back when the name Matthias von Herhardt held no particular significance in his life.

*He hasn't changed a bit,* Kyle thought. In a way, this was disappointing, but at the same time, it brought him some relief. He knew that the duke made Layla happy. He didn't understand how, but he had accepted it as a fact.

The duke proceeded into the hotel, with the relaxed gait of a perfect gentleman who was also a perfect businessman. Kyle continued to gaze at him until he was out of sight.

Without ever seeking it out, he had heard the occasional piece of news or gossip about Duke and Duchess Herhardt. It would have been hard for anyone living in Berg to avoid hearing about them. For quite a while, rumors about the couple had been spreading like wildfire: from the wedding that flipped the traditions of the empire upside down, to the mistress-turned-duchess, to the son born out of wedlock who was now the heir to the dukedom. Every day there was new gossip, always accompanied by all sorts of wild speculation and criticism. Naturally, aristocratic circles showed the most zeal for this gossip, but it wasn't much different among the students of Ratse University, where not only was the duchess enrolled, but so was the Herhardt family doctor's son, himself a key

figure in the scandal.

Kyle had spent the last year acting like he had no connection to the situation at all. At first, friends of his brought up the duke and duchess frequently, trying their hardest to get some reaction out of him. After a couple of seasons of this, however, they gave up. Kyle was well aware that the duke himself had played a large part in shutting them up.

Duke Herhardt was wildly devoted to his wife, and wildly possessive of her. It didn't take long for this to sink in for the aristocrats of Berg. From the start, he made it quite clear to them. Once the aristocrats saw how brutal his methods could be, they at least stopped openly slandering the duchess. Other than his passion for his new wife, however, the duke was unchanged from his earlier persona, and this made people fear him even more.

Once the duke was out of sight, Kyle headed into the clinic. He walked with broad strides, much like the cheerful gait he had walked with as a boy while exploring Arvis with his best friend.

He still considered the duke to be a bad person. He didn't expect ever to feel differently about this. However, he recognized that, even if the duke was a bad person, he could still be a good husband. And he didn't expect this opinion to change either.

* * *

Duke Herhardt's schedule for his trip to Ratse was packed. After having lunch at the ministry of foreign affairs, he went straight to the hotel for a meeting with some entrepreneurs. Then he had to meet with his company's board of directors to finalize plans for an investment in an overseas oilfield.

The matters he was attending to didn't call for such a rush, but Mark Evers, his assistant, knew better than to say this to him.

The day the duke departed from Arvis, the duchess had asked in a sullen tone, *“How long will you be gone?”*

After thinking for a moment, he replied, *“About a week.”*

In order to fit all his appointments into just one week, he was

going to have to have a packed schedule from dawn to dusk every day of the trip. However, he didn't seem troubled by this prospect at all.

The duchess couldn't hide her delight to hear that the trip was going to be shorter than she had expected. *"I'll miss you,"* she said, smiling.

The duke gave her a goodbye kiss and went on his way.

Even in this moment, Mark knew that his master was going to use whatever means were at his disposal in order to complete his work within a week. Thus, Mark had no choice but to play his part in helping him achieve this. It seemed almost impossible, but he had to make it work.

As they passed through the hotel's lobby on their way to the banquet hall, Mark hurriedly reminded the duke of the names of everyone he needed to talk to at the upcoming meeting, along with the issues he needed to discuss with them. Even as he listened closely to his assistant, Matthias maintained his usual dignified gait and posture, as well as the faint, polite smile that he habitually wore whenever he was conducting business.

When they neared the door to the banquet hall, Mark started walking a pace behind the duke, as was proper for an assistant. From this vantage point, he was able to observe the slight but distinct change in the atmosphere of the banquet hall the moment the duke entered, as everyone's attention shifted to him and people started murmuring about him.

Duke Herhardt had many enemies. Quite a few people were upset by his actions, whether by his marriage, which broke all the conventions of aristocratic society, or by his bold and aggressive expansion of his company. However, Duke Herhardt was strong enough that enemies were irrelevant to him. In the chaos after the war, many prestigious families lost their way and fell to ruin, but Duke Herhardt kept pace with the changing times and was becoming wealthier and more powerful by the day. Even the aristocrats who criticized him for disrupting the old order of things

had no choice but to continue relying on him, while the new crop of capitalists held him in high esteem, since he kept their competitors in check.

Matthias stood in the doorway for a moment, then entered the banquet hall at a relaxed pace. No matter what feelings they harbored towards him, all the men gathered in the hall greeted the young head of the House of Herhardt with utmost courtesy.

Matthias began to make his leisurely way through the crowd.

* * *

As soon as Kyle reached the second floor of the clinic, he heard a familiar voice.

“Dr. Ettman! Dr. Ettman!”

He looked down the sunlit hall and saw a little girl running towards him. Her father was an inpatient at the clinic, and she came to see him often.

She stopped right in front of Kyle and smiled at him, struggling to catch her breath. Her large, green eyes shone in the sunlight.

“The doctor's not here yet,” Kyle told her, smiling warmly. He patted her head, smoothing down her messy bangs.

“You're not a doctor?” She tilted her head slightly, and her blonde French braid swung behind her.

“No, not yet. I'm still just a student,” he replied, patting her head again.

The sensation of her soft hair against his hand started to bring back memories of the pretty girl who stole his heart when he was a boy.

“Well, I'm still going to call you Doctor. You're a doctor to me,” she insisted.

He chuckled and nodded to show he would allow this. She smiled even more brightly in response. “Oh!” she suddenly exclaimed, “I brought this for you!” Reaching into her bulging pocket, she pulled out a ripe peach. “You gave me a chocolate last time I was here. And you gave me a cookie the time before that. So...”

“So you're paying me back?”

“Yes!” she replied. Her voice echoed through the quiet hallway. “It's a really tasty peach. Be sure to eat it,” she added in a whisper, as though she were sharing a secret with him. With that, she turned and started running in the direction from which she had come.

Left on his own with the peach in his hand, he gazed down the hallway, watching the girl run to her father's room.

Before closing the door, she looked back at him and waved, smiling brightly, just like little Layla used to smile and wave at him back in the beautiful days of their youth.

Still holding the peach, he walked upstairs to the next floor. Other than when he was assisting his father, he spent most of the day in the library at the far end of the clinic's third floor. Filled with medical texts collected by the Ettman family over several generations, the clinic's library was the perfect place to focus on one's studies.

Instead of sitting at the desk where he usually studied, he first went to the library's window, which looked out onto the small park behind the clinic. He watched a flock of white pigeons flying by in the sky for a moment, then looked down at the peach in his hand.

Back when he was a young boy, there were so many things that he had wanted to give little Layla—school supplies, books, snacks. It pained him whenever he saw something that Layla lacked, and he would fret over how to get it for her. Fortunately, she always accepted his gifts, and soon afterwards she would always give him something in return.

At first, he had wondered why she always felt the need to give him something in return. Was it because she didn't want to feel indebted to him? If so, did that mean that she didn't like him? After sullenly ruminating on this thought for a short while, he had decided that the real reason she always gave him something in return was simply that she always felt grateful for his gifts and wanted to show her gratitude with a gift of her own. With this perspective, he was happy to receive all the gifts she offered him.

Colorful feathers, unusual rocks, hand-picked fruit—all the things that she gathered for him while exploring the forest were wonderful and pretty, just like herself, but it was the fruit that he liked most of all. This was because they would always share the fruit, which meant he would get to spend a bit more time with her. The fruits she picked were always sweet and delicious.

Sitting on the window sill and leaning against the frame, he took a big bite out of the peach. It was delicious, just as the girl had promised.

Gazing down at the park, he slowly ate the rest of the fruit. The green foliage of the park deepened as the afternoon wore on, which naturally reminded him of Layla's light-green eyes. This made his heart ache little, but he didn't mind.

His memories of the girl who had dominated his childhood years were still vivid in his mind. They would remain a par of him for the rest of his life. He now accepted this without bitterness. Just because they didn't end up together, that didn't mean that his love for her was meaningless. Thanks to Layla, that part of his life was beautiful, and he believed that having that beauty in his childhood helped him to grow to be a better person than he would have otherwise become.

Layla was not just his former lover, she was his best friend. She was like a sister to him.

His hand, fragrant with the scent of peach juice, clutched the pit tightly.

*I'm so happy to have known you. Thank you for being a part of my life.* As he thought these words, which he would never be able to utter to her in person, he smiled and stood up. He finally sat down at the desk where a pile of medical texts was waiting for him. A long ray of the summer afternoon's light shone across his head.

With fingers still slightly sticky with peach juice, he turned the pages of a textbook. Soon the quiet library was filled with the sound of a pen scratching.

* * *

Looking at the photograph had become a part of Layla's daily routine. After thoroughly dusting the already-clean frame, she once again stared intently at the photograph. Not only was it the only photograph of Uncle Bill ever taken, but it also contained the duke's family. The Herhardts were seated in the middle of the photograph, with the Arvis staff standing in a row behind them.

Her gaze shifted from the far left side, where Uncle Bill was standing, to the face of the young duke, who was sitting right in the center of the frame. Printed at the bottom of the photograph was the date at which it was taken. It was the year before she had arrived at Arvis in the mail coach.

While the seventeen-year-old Matthias's features looked noticeably younger, his posture and facial expression looked exactly the same as now. This was true of all the photographs and portraits of him hung on various walls throughout the mansion, even those of him as a young child.

Layla smiled as she thought about this. With the smile still lingering in her eyes, she looked at Uncle Bill again. She then thought about suggesting to Matthias that they travel to Lovita for her next break from college. Relations between Berg and Lovita still weren't as amicable as they had been before the war, but at least the border was open between them. If winter break didn't work out, perhaps they could go next summer. They could go see Sienne's beautiful seaside, and she could visit Uncle Bill's grave.

She tightly shut her eyes and opened them again, then carefully put down the picture frame and turned around. This afternoon, Elise von Herhardt was going on an outing by herself, for the first time in quite a while. It was a rare chance for Layla to have her son to herself.

She started walking excitedly, then stopped when she heard a knock. She also heard the sound of Felix's cheerful laughter, which meant that it was probably the nanny at the door.

“Come in!” she replied, matching her son's cheerfulness as she

strode across the master suite's drawing room.

A moment later, just as she expected, she saw the nanny open the door with Felix in her arms.

The nanny deftly transferred Felix into his mother's outstretched arms, then backed away. Having delighted his grandmother and great-grandmother with his mature grasp of proper manners, he turned back into a toddler as soon as he was in his mother's embrace.

“Dowager Herhardt went to her room to take a nap, and Lady Herhardt is getting ready for her outing,” the nanny said. Then, in a quieter voice, she added, “And His Grace is returning this afternoon.”

Layla, who had been giggling and playing with her son, turned and looked at the nanny with widened eyes. “This afternoon?”

She had been eagerly counting the days until his return, so she was well aware that there was still another day remaining before it would have been a week.

“Yes,” the nanny replied. “Mr. Evers called and said that the chauffeur should bring the car to Karlsbar Central Station by three o'clock this afternoon.”

With each word the nanny said, the smile on Layla's face grew brighter and more excited. She felt a little upset with Matthias for not mentioning that he would be returning early on any of their several phone calls throughout the week, but she was so happy about not having to wait another long day to see him, she was ready to forgive him at once.

“I'm going to go on a walk outside with Felix,” she told the nanny in a lively voice after checking the clock. “You don't need to accompany us.”

When the nanny heard the bashful tone with which the duchess added this last remark, she let out the laughter that she had been holding in, and replied, “Yes, Your Grace. Have a nice walk.”

# Side Story 16:
## Bird of Paradise (16)

Silence reigned inside the car for the whole drive from Karlsbar to Arvis. The duke sat slumped in his seat, his eyes closed under the weight of the accumulated fatigue from six days of back-to-back meetings without rest. Mark Evers was similarly exhausted, having accompanied the duke throughout the trip while managing the itinerary. Instead of briefing the duke on his upcoming schedule, he fell silent as well.

The chauffeur slowed the car's pace slightly as he turned onto the quiet road leading to Arvis. Their entrance into Arvis was heralded by a breeze carrying the fresh scent of trees through the half-open windows, along with the sound of the leaves rustling.

For a while, Mark calmly took in the beautiful scenery. Then, all of a sudden, his eyes widened at an unexpected sight.

The chauffeur saw it too: a fair distance down the road, a woman was walking towards them. And not just any woman. It was Duchess Layla von Herhardt, holding her son in her arms.

For a moment, Mark panicked internally as he tried to come up with just the right words with which to rouse his master from his sleep. As soon as he turned and looked at the duke, however, he realized that there was no need for this deliberation.

The duke had already opened his eyes and was gazing out the window. It was clear from the faint but warm smile on his lips that he had spotted his wife at once. While the duke went through life smiling politely in most situations, the only person who could elicit such a warm, tender smile was the beautiful woman walking towards them.

Without needing to hear a command from the duke, Mark made eye contact with the chauffeur and gave a slight nod. The chauffeur got the message immediately. He brought the car to a stop, and hurriedly got out and opened the rear passenger door.

The duke stepped out onto the road at once, holding his jacket in his hand. He thanked the chauffeur, and proceeded to tie his necktie, fasten his cufflinks, adjust the pocket watch chain adorning his vest, and put on and button his jacket, all with movements as smooth and natural as flowing water. “I'll see you at the mansion,” he said in a gentle tone, before turning away from the car.

Still holding Felix in her arms, Layla waved at Matthias. Felix then followed along with his mother and waved as well.

Matthias, with his hands held loosely behind his back, started walking slowly towards his wife and son. Meanwhile, the car quietly drove on. Once she was sure the men in the car couldn't see her anymore, Layla started walking at a much faster pace. Even while carrying Felix, who was getting heavier by the day, her steps were feather-light.

Without meaning to, Matthias stopped in his tracks, and calmly took in the sight of Layla and Felix's joint shadow, which looked as thick as a tree trunk as they approached him. *Layla is coming,* he thought. She was coming towards him, just like the eternal, verdant waves the breeze made as it rustled through the trees.

For a while as he watched her approach, his eyes were as calm as still pools. Then a smile spread across his face like ripples in these pools. At that moment, Layla suddenly came to a stop.

He gradually narrowed his eyes as he waited to see what she was up to. She then turned to their son and exchanged a few words with him, giggling. Then she carefully set Felix down on the road.

“Daddy!” Felix exclaimed. His excited voice shook the lazy afternoon air, as did the sound of his footsteps as he started running towards his father.

Matthias grinned as he watched this. With each waddling step Felix took, the broad sailor collar of his shirt fluttered like a pair of wings. He staggered a few times as he ran but his legs had grown longer and stronger recently, and he managed to make it all the way to his father without falling over.

Waving, he said, “Hi, Daddy,” and wrapped his arms around

Matthias's leg. As he did so the playful smile on his face looked just like his mother's.

After watching his son approach and greet him, Matthias smiled and replied, “Hi there Felix,” then smoothly lifted him up into his arms.

Layla then arrived at their side, with a delighted smile on her face that matched Felix's.

With Felix held in one arm and his other arm stretched out to hold his wife's hand, Matthias walked along the late-summer foliage lining Platanus Road. As Layla told him all about the things she and Felix had done over the past week, her voice was as bright and warm as the rays of sunlight peeking through the leaves of the trees.

After going on for a while about a botany textbook that she had been reading earlier that day, she abruptly changed topics, saying, “I'm so glad you came back early.”

Matthias turned to look at her. She gazed straight into his eyes and added, “I couldn't wait for you to get home.”

“So that you could use me as an instrument of your desire?” he quipped.

“Yes,” she coolly replied. “Not *just* for that, but yes, that was one thing I was looking forward to.”

Because she was looking up at him with clear, confident eyes as she spoke, he decided to play along. He then observed the bashful way she was blushing and fidgeting with her hands, and he felt happy to know that she was his.

Shortly after he submissively nodded in response to her remark, she burst into laughter. Seeing his mother laugh excitedly, Felix joined in on the fun, laughing along with her even though he didn't know what she was laughing at. The quiet road became noisy with their shared laughter.

The husband and wife continued to exchange jokes and laughter as they walked hand in hand down Platanus Road. As they came up to the imposingly large, ornate gates of Arvis, Layla halted for a

moment and said, “I missed you. You kept popping into my mind throughout the week, and each time I thought of you, I missed you even more.” She felt a little surprised at how easy it was to say her mind. “And what about you?” she then asked, even though she already knew the answer. “How did you feel? Did you miss me too?” She was pestering him to answer the question because she wanted to hear the answer from his own mouth.

Instead of saying anything in response, he stooped down and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. It wasn't the answer she was looking for, but it did come from his mouth and she liked it. She liked the feeling of his soft lips brushing against hers, and the feeling of their breath mingling. It was a warm, affectionate kiss. Earlier in her life, she never would have expected to share such a moment with him, and that made it feel even more special.

Just as their lips were about to touch again, Felix started whining. “Daddy! Daddy!!” When he didn't get the reaction he wanted, he whined even louder, and started to whimper. “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!!”

Matthias frowned at his son, who was struggling in his arms. For a moment, Felix frowned back in imitation. Then, he craned his neck towards his father's face and planted a loud, wet kiss on his cheek. After that, he boldly presented his own cheek, waiting for Matthias to kiss him back.

Layla looked joyously at the father and son. “Good for you, Matty. Your son loves you so much!”

*“Go over to Daddy and show him how much you love him,”* she had said to Felix earlier. His clear understanding of what she meant showed how smart of a child he was.

Matthias paused for a moment, then, smiling, reciprocated his son's kiss. Delighted to have his love display returned, Felix burst into ecstatic laughter.

“Our next child is going to love you just as much as Felix,” Layla declared, looking straight into Matthias's eyes. “I know she will. I'm certain of it.”

* * *

The duke's family left Arvis just as the cool wind that heralded the end of summer was starting to blow. They had only spent one season at Arvis, but Felix had grown a remarkable amount in that time, and the servants who had stayed behind at the Ratse mansion were amazed to see how much bigger he was.

Layla had spent the bulk of her time at Arvis studying in preparation for the upcoming semester, and learning to swim. Her academic achievements during the break were impressive; her swimming achievements, less so. Even after all her practice, she was by no means a good swimmer. However, she had gotten to the point where she could float in the water without screaming, and she felt proud of this modest accomplishment.

*"Next summer I'd like to learn the backstroke,"* she said, declaring her grand ambition to Matthias as they sat on the end of the dock gazing at the sunset after her last swimming lesson. *"I want to be able to swim just like you."*

It was a sincere wish, but Matthias took it as a joke and chuckled. This hurt her pride a little, but she forgave him when she heard the next thing he said.

*"Sure,"* he replied, his voice as smooth as a duck's feathers, *"we'll work on that next summer, Layla."*

With that promise, she no longer felt hurt or disappointed—it was a happy summer once again for her.

*But what was it like for him? Did he have a good summer too?* she now wondered, gazing across the breakfast table at her husband, I, who was setting down his water glass, and was also looking at her. A dry ray of sunlight streamed in through the newly hung curtains, shining on his face as he seemed ready to hear what she had to say.

"Will today be another busy day for you?" she asked. She was gripping the napkin on her lap as she gazed at him. In his beautifully handsome face, she thought she could see signs that he had changed a lot, but she wasn't sure. Maybe things were the same as always.

“Yes, probably,” he replied.

“Does that mean you won't be able to join me for dinner again?”

“Well...” He sank into thought for a moment, then rang the service bell to summon his assistant.

Still clutching her napkin, Layla waited as the two men talked quietly.

After dismissing his assistant, Matthias turned back to his wife and asked, “Layla, would you mind having a late dinner tonight?”

“How late?”

“About nine o'clock?”

“Sure! I'll be looking forward to it all day,” she gladly replied. There was something she urgently wanted to discuss with him. She had considered bringing it up at breakfast, but she was fine with waiting now that she knew they would be having dinner together.

As soon as breakfast was over, Matthias left for work. After seeing him off, Layla didn't tend to the garden or read like usual. Instead, she lay down on the long sofa in the drawing room and closed her eyes. After what seemed like only a brief moment, she opened her eyes again and discovered that it was already time to leave for class.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” asked the nanny, holding Felix, who had just awoken. “You're not feeling ill, are you?”

“No, I don't think I'm sick,” Layla bashfully replied as the nanny passed Felix to her. “I've just been feeling so tired lately, and...”

The nanny's eyes widened as she looked at Layla with concern. “Your Grace, are you saying-”

“Do you think Dr. Peller could make a house call this evening?” Layla sheepishly asked, as she patted Felix's head.

“Of course, Your Grace! Or perhaps I should have him come over right now?” There was a joyous look on the nanny's face as she observed the duchess's flushed cheeks.

Layla thought for a moment, then shook her head as she passed Felix back to the nanny and stood up. “No, I'd prefer to see him this evening, once I'm back from class.

“Class? Goodness. Are you really still planning to go to class, Your Grace?” the nanny asked, sounding anxious.

Layla calmly nodded. “Yes I am. I'll be back this afternoon,” she said, gently but firmly.

Knowing how stubborn the duchess could be, the nanny made no further attempt to dissuade her. Glancing outside, she caught a glimpse of the duchess's shiny chrome bicycle next to one of the mansion's flowerbeds. Turning back towards the duchess, she worriedly asked, “You're not planning to ride your bicycle to campus, are you?”

Layla laughed and shook her head. “No, I'm not going to ride my bike.”

“Good. Then I'll summon the chauffeur right away—”

“I'm going to walk. I'll just think of it as a pleasant stroll.” Smiling brightly, she picked up her leather bag and slung it over her shoulder. The bag, which was the last birthday present Uncle Bill gave her, was quite worn out by now, but she intended to keep using it until she graduated from college.

The nanny and the maids continued to express concern, following her all the way out the mansion's front door, but they were unable to talk the stubborn duchess out of her decision to walk to campus. After repeatedly assuring them that she would be fine, she started off towards campus with light steps, before suddenly stopping and turning to face them again. “Oh! After I see Dr. Peller, I'm going to talk to the duke myself!”

The dazed looks on the maids' faces quickly gave way to smiles just as bright as Layla's.

“Yes, Your Grace!” they replied in unison. Their voices sounded like a chorus amid the autumn sunlight. “Don't worry, we'll keep your secret!”

# Side Story 17:
## Bird of Paradise (17)

The news of Duchess Herhardt's pregnancy spread quickly throughout the high society of Karlsbar and Ratse. The duke and duchess were a young, healthy couple, so there was nothing particularly remarkable about them having a second child. What was causing a stir was the fact that the duchess was continuing to attend college while pregnant.

*"At the very least, we can expect the child to be exceptionally intelligent,"* Elise von Herhardt remarked. This was all that she said on the matter.

Katharina von Herhardt's feelings were more or less the same. Both women knew that there was no point in putting up meaningless opposition, since Matthias was not going to reverse his decision no matter what they said. While they had worried that his marriage to Layla would ruin his reputation, they actually respected the way he was sticking to his guns now.

*"If you've already decided to do that, you might as well give it your all," Elise had unexpectedly said a few days earlier while talking to Layla on the phone. "As long as you're living as a Herhardt, you mustn't let anyone ignore you. Got it?"*

Elise was speaking with her usual quiet, unemotional voice, but by now Layla had learned to detect the subtle variations in her tone. When she was speaking from her heart, she spoke even more slowly and gently than usual.

*"Of course!"* Layla replied, more enthusiastically than she had intended to. *"I'll try my absolute best, I promise."*

Elise clicked her tongue and sighed at Layla's unladylike tone, but she didn't go as far as to scold her.

Layla truly intended to try her best, so that she could keep her promise. Of course, she knew that some things couldn't be overcome by sheer force of will, such as morning sickness. Her

morning sickness had subsided for a while. When it started up again, she closed her book and lay down on the sofa. After what felt like only a brief nap, she opened her eyes to discover that the sun had set, and Matthias was by her side. When she realized that she was lying with her head on his lap, a bright smile spread across her pale face.

As soon as their eyes met, he asked, “Did you eat?” Ever since her morning sickness had begun, this question had become his way of greeting her.

“Yes, I ate a little today,” she replied.

“Peaches again?” he asked, glancing at the basket of peaches on the table.

Throughout her pregnancy, their bedroom had been suffused with the sweet scent of peaches.

* * *

Layla had delivered the news of her pregnancy to Matthias the night of their late dinner together. As she told him, her eyes shone with joyous anticipation, as though she were giving him a surprise gift. He was very careful to react in such a way that she wouldn't realize he already knew.

Her behavior that morning had given him a hunch that there was something she was holding back from telling him. His hunch was confirmed that evening, when he talked on the phone with Dr. Peller, the family doctor.

*“Can you make a house call? I think my wife is pregnant,”* Matthias said.

The doctor remained silent for quite a while, before replying, *“Your Grace, you already knew?”* He sounded quite confused. *“Your wife asked me to keep it a secret, because she wanted to tell you herself...”*

*“Yes, I figured,”* Matthias replied, remaining calm as he spoke to the flustered doctor. *“That's fine. I'll pretend that I don't know about it.”*

It wasn't hard to guess what Layla was hoping for. She wanted to give him a wonderful surprise, and he wanted to let her think that she had.

After exchanging a few formalities with the doctor, Matthias calmly got to the heart of the matter. *"When she was pregnant with our first child, she had some health issues."* As he recalled helplessly watching as Layla feverishly hovered on the brink of death, the memories felt more traumatic than his memories of the war itself. *"This time around, I hope she has no such issues,"* he added in a flat tone. *"Of course, I'm sure that with you looking after her, Dr. Peller, there is no cause for concern."*

*"I will do everything I can to help your wife have a healthy pregnancy and delivery,"* the doctor replied.

With that, their phone conversation concluded.

From then on, without even needing to be asked, Dr. Peller made frequent house calls to check up on the duchess's health. He reported that, other than her perfectly natural morning sickness, she was completely healthy, as was the fetus inside her.

Everything was going well, at least so far.

* * *

The night when Matthias returned to the mansion, ready to act surprised at the news of Layla's pregnancy, he found it somewhat awkward.

Layla was evasive throughout dinner, repeatedly changing the subject. As time wore on, the anticipation in her eyes grew as she looked at him.

As he waited for her to deliver the news, he remained uncertain how he should react. He started to ponder over his true feelings on the matter. Was he happy about it? That was an easy question. Of course he was happy about it. His second child was developing in the womb of the woman he loved. This was Layla's ardent wish. However, he suspected that she was expecting him to have stronger feelings about the situation than he did. To him, it was a fairly

straightforward matter. They had put forth the effort to conceive a child, and their efforts had been a success. It was a natural, predictable outcome.

Only after they were completely done with dinner did she finally reveal the long-awaited news. He reacted with awkward silence, still uncertain how he should respond. Luckily, this turned out to be the perfect response, as she assumed he was simply overwhelmed with joy.

She guided him towards the proper response by spreading open her arms and saying, *"Would you give me a hug? I'd like that."* Her beautiful green eyes shone with cautious anticipation.

He immediately pulled his lovely wife into his embrace and hugged her tightly.

A little later that night, while she was still in his arms, she requested a gift from him. To his surprise, all she wanted was a peach.

*"I know it doesn't sound like much, but it's exactly what I want,"* she said, staring straight into his eyes. *"I just want a crisp, sweet peach, with no bruises."*

He found it hard to believe that this was all she wanted, but he gladly complied with her request, giving her not just one peach but a whole basket of them. She accepted the basket and held it to her chest with a look of transcendent delight on her face. She then set down the basket and carefully inspected the peaches, looking for the prettiest one of the bunch.

Observing the serious look on her face, he laughed and said, *"They're all yours, Layla."*

*"I know, but still..."* Still looking very serious, she held out two peaches towards him, one in each hand, and asked, *"Which one of these would you say is prettier?"*

To him, they looked more or less identical, but he could tell that the question was very important to her.

*"You pick one,"* she said. *"I want to eat the prettiest one first."*

Not wanting to disappoint her, he carefully scrutinized the

identical-looking peaches, then selected the one in her left hand, which seemed ever so slightly brighter-colored and shinier.

She then proceeded to stare intently for a long while at the peach he had designated as the prettiest. Seeing what seemed to be complex emotions in her eyes, he wondered what she was thinking, but he didn't ask. Instead he just stood quietly by her side, waiting for her eyes to turn back towards him.

Fortunately, it wasn't long before the smile returned to her face. Then she carefully, ceremoniously started eating the peach.

As he watched her nibble at the fruit, chewing each crispy, fragrant bite with care, he found himself becoming enraptured by the sight. Whenever he thought back to that night, this was the memory that popped into his mind first. And so, whenever he thought about the baby growing inside her belly, he could feel the sweet scent of peach juice tickling his nose, as was happening right now.

* * *

"Yes, I had some peaches, but I ate other food too," Layla replied in a slow, drowsy voice.

Slowly caressing her hair, Matthias asked, "What sort of other food?"

"I had some eggs and a little chicken. And some bread, too."

"Hmm, I don't think those aren't the best things to eat when you've got an upset stomach," he remarked, furrowing his brow as he looked down at her.

"Well, I requested them specifically, so don't get upset with anyone else," she replied, looking nervously up at him. "I did some research on fetal development, and I learned that morning sickness tends to subside once the placenta is fully formed. Eggs and meat are supposed to be especially helpful to that end. And they're good for the fetus as well."

"Fine, but isn't it unpleasant eating food that makes you sick?"

"It is, but I'd prefer feeling very sick for a short time over feeling

a little sick for a long time. After all, I have exams coming up."

"Sounds like a thoroughly scientific conclusion."

"Yes, it's quite logical, don't you think?" Giggling, she sat up. Before long, however, her face went pale. It looked like she was going to be sick again.

"You should lie down in bed," he said, as she put her head back on his lap. "No, I prefer the sofa," she stubbornly replied, shaking her head. "My nausea gets worse when I lie in bed."

"What's the difference between the bed and the sofa?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not sure exactly... It's just a feeling I've gotten," she replied.

He chuckled at the contrast between the intelligent look in her eyes and the nonsensical things coming out of her mouth.

"Listen, I understand that what I'm saying might sound a little irrational," she said, frowning as she acknowledged the disparity between her thoroughly analytic decision to eat eggs and meat despite the nausea they caused, and her intuitive, emotional decision to avoid lying in bed during the day. "But I can't help it. I bet you couldn't stay perfectly rational either if you had morning sickness." It seemed like she had more to say, but she went silent and shut her eyes.

Gently stroking her pale, sweat-beaded forehead, he let out a silent sigh.

After a while, she opened her eyes again and asked, "Matty, would you read my book to me?"

He furrowed his brow once again. "Your book?"

"Yes, it's over there on the table," she replied, pointing at a thick book on paleontology, next to the peach basket. "I haven't gotten through all the parts that will be on the exam yet. I'd like you to read it to me."

Snickering and shaking his head, he opened the book, which was sticky with her peach-juice fingerprints.

The peach-scented air was soon filled with the sound of his voice explaining the evolution of ancient life forms.

With her eyes closed, she hung on his every word. Even though his reading was interrupted now and then by the sound of her gulping to keep from retching, it was overall a very pleasant night.

* * *

As winter break approached, Layla developed a reputation in her classes comparable to the reputation her husband held in the business world. Some of her classmates started calling her *the ruthless duchess*. As if attending classes while pregnant weren't enough, she had achieved top-student status once again. Her rival students now viewed her less with contempt than with fear.

However, as she stood with her arms around her bulbous belly, looking at the list of names and grades, she didn't look frightening at all. On the contrary, she looked positively friendly and welcoming. Even as some of her rivals congratulated her with obvious sarcasm, she smiled back at them and thanked them sincerely.

*"You're certainly far from the average girl,"* Elise von Herhardt replied, after Layla had called and told her all about the semester. *"Way to go, Layla."* Elise's voice softened noticeably through the course of the conversation.

Layla thought back on that short phone call many times. Each time she did, she felt a wave of joy, and she could feel the fetus kicking, as if it was feeling joyous as well.

"Matty!" she shouted, after feeling the fetus kick once again. "She's kicking! Come quick!"

She hoped that he would hurry, but he walked into the room at his usual leisurely pace.

As he sat on the edge of the bed, she grabbed his hand and placed it on her belly. "She's kicking. You can feel it, right?"

He patiently sat and felt her belly for a long time, because he could tell that she wanted him to. It wasn't the first time the fetus had kicked, so it wasn't a particularly remarkable occasion, but he greatly enjoyed seeing how excited she got about it.

She continued holding his hand firmly against her belly until the kicking finally stopped. Even after his hand was free, he continued to sit on the edge of the bed, gazing at his beautiful wife. The glimmering light from the fireplace made the curve of her round belly even more distinct.

He went and got a warm washcloth. When he touched it to her chest, she flinched and said, “I can do it.” However, he ignored her and proceeded to gently wipe down her body.

Once she realized that further resistance was futile, she submitted to his soft touch. Even though the washcloth felt pleasantly warm against her skin, her heart was beating at a steadily increasing pace.

By the time he finished, her cheeks were flushed bright red. He continued to gaze at her body. The sight of her big, round belly gave him a somewhat different feeling this time than it had the first time she was pregnant. This time, the feeling was one of languid satisfaction.

He carefully dressed her in her nightgown, and then lay down on the bed with her in his arms. Instead of struggling like in the past, she calmly buried her face in his neck. By now it was a regular occurrence for them to fall asleep holding each other like this, with their legs gently intertwined.

“A few weeks from now, I'm really going to look like a penguin,” she whispered in a worried tone. “I don't know if you'll still find me pretty.” *But I hope you'll call me pretty anyway,* she wanted to add. Feeling too embarrassed to say this, she hesitated for a moment.

To her surprise, however, he seemed to have guessed what she was thinking. “I'll still tell you you're pretty,” he quietly assured her. “I'll tell you that every day, Layla.”

# Side Story 18:
## Bird of Paradise (18)

The newest member of the Herhardt family arrived with the spring, on a warm, sunny afternoon when the trees were packed with fresh flower buds.

A hospital attendant approached with swift, soft steps. “It was a safe, easy delivery. They're almost ready for you, Your Grace.”

Matthias set down the tea cup he was holding, and turned towards the door where the attendant was standing. The attendant offered some words of congratulation, then left. In his place, Dr. Peller then appeared, with his medical team following behind him. After reporting on the mother and baby's condition and offering their congratulations, this group left as well.

The VIP suite's waiting room fell silent again, now that only Herhardts remained there. Matthias gazed out the window at the bulging flower buds on the tree branches, while his mother and grandmother gazed at him. Felix, full of excitement at the prospect of meeting his new sibling, had run around all morning until he tired himself out. Now he was sound asleep.

“Congratulations, Matthias. You’re now the father of two children,” Katharina said, her soft voice filling the room along with the bright, spring sunlight.

Only then did Matthias turn to look at his mother and grandmother, who were sitting across the table from him.

He had come straight from work to the hospital. His clothing and hair were immaculate, and he bore the facial expression and posture of a perfect gentleman, as usual. To an onlooker, it would have been impossible to believe that he was a man who had just heard that the love of his life was in labor. Before he arrived, his mother and grandmother had worried that the stress of the moment might have caused him to lose some of the dignified appearance expected of him as a duke. To the contrary, it was now the utter

flawlessness of his appearance that was astounding them.

“Thank you, Grandmother, and Mother,” he replied, calmly looking into each woman’s eyes. The gentle smile on his lips also looked the same as always.

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, and soon the attendant returned and said that the birthing room had been tidied up and was ready for visitors.

“You go see Layla and the baby first, Matthias. We’ll stay here and wait with Felix. Once he’s awake, we’ll come and say hello,” Elise said, stroking the hair of her sleeping grandson as she held him in her arms. She had no idea what was going on in Matthias’s head, but she knew that Layla would want to see her husband before anyone else.

Matthias nodded and rose from his seat. He seemed strangely cold and aloof as he straightened his clothes and left the waiting room.

“I know that young man is my flesh and blood, but I must say, I don't understand him at all,” Elise said, looking with narrowed eyes at Katharina. “After he went to all that trouble arranging that special gift for Layla, why is he acting so cold today?”

At the beginning of the previous month, Matthias had told Elise and Katharina that he intended to have Bill Remmer's grave transported from Lovita to Berg. He even planned to enlist the aid of the Lovita royal family to ensure that it would be done as quickly as possible.

Elise was opposed to the idea, but Katharina was strongly in favor of it, saying that she knew all too well the sadness of having one’s parent's gravesite at a distant location across the border.

*“Parent?!”* Elise balked. *“What, are we going to declare to the whole empire that* Duchess Herhardt is the daughter of our former gardener?”

As upset as she was about the whole thing, she could only keep up her resistance for so long. After grumbling for several days, she finally relented, indirectly expressing her approval by saying,

*“Whatever you do with the gardener, I won't allow him to be placed in the Herhardt family plot.”*

She was relieved to learn that her son had not lost his wits enough to have planned to do that anyway. Instead, he had chosen a new spot not far from Arvis. Before the spring was over, Bill Remmer would be resting at a spot with a view of his beloved forest.

“That grand gesture showed how much he loves Layla,” Elise continued. “Such love doesn't disappear overnight. And yet, today, he's acting like-”

“Elise, look over there,” Katharina said, chuckling quietly to herself as she pointed to the table by which Matthias had been sitting.

At first, Elise thought she was pointing to the cup of tea, which had gone cold in Matthias's hands without him taking a single sip. However, she soon noticed something else, next to the cup. Her eyes went wide and she muttered, “Goodness...”

It was his cufflinks. He had taken them off and had been nervously fiddling with them. She couldn't believe it. Nor could she believe that he could have left the room without remembering to put them back on. For anyone else, this would have been a minor oversight. For the perfect gentleman Matthias von Herhardt, however, it meant he must have been feeling extremely agitated, despite his outward calmness.

“Goodness, Matthias, goodness dear!” Elise repeated. It was all she could say.

* * *

The VIP suite was divided into two rooms: the waiting room for guests, and the patient's room, which in this case had also served as the birthing room.

Matthias slowly walked down the hallway between the two rooms. Each step he took rekindled memories of the baby’s conception, development, and birth.

He now knew what Layla's belly looked like at full term, as well as what she thought and how much she smiled.

She had worried that he might find her ugly with such a big belly, but her worries were unfounded. Throughout her pregnancy, he found her dazzlingly beautiful.

As he neared the end of the hallway, the attendant that had been following behind him stepped ahead and opened the door to the birthing room. Matthias gathered his breath before crossing the threshold.

He wasn't worried about Layla's or the baby's health. The doctor had already told him that they were safe and sound. He was just feeling a little frightened, gripped by a mysterious fear that occasionally crept up on him at moments of great happiness.

What if all of this was a dream? What if he were to suddenly wake up and realize that this life of transcendent happiness was no more than the delusion of a man who lost his mind because of unrequited love?

“Matty?”

He was finally roused from his daze by the sound of a weak voice calling to him from within the room. He looked up and saw Layla. Lying in the huge hospital bed, she looked especially small and delicate.

She called to him again, even quieter this time, and a gentle smile spread across her face. As always, her smile was like a ray of light guiding him back to reality.

Looking at her smile, he knew he wasn't dreaming. Back when she first ran away to Lovita and he was wasting away with longing for her, he had tried and tried to picture her sweet smile in his head, but his imagination had never managed to produce anything half as beautiful as the smile he now saw before him.

He crossed the threshold and, walking to her bedside, hugged her tightly. She lifted her quivering arms and wrapped them around his back.

Their embrace lasted until a nurse approached, holding the baby

wrapped in swaddling clothes.

“Isn't she pretty?” Layla whispered with a shaky voice as she took the baby into her arms and smiled brightly with tears in her eyes. “It's our daughter, Leah.”

The baby stirred in her sleep, as though she liked hearing her mother say her name.

“Leah...” As Matthias whispered the name he had given their daughter, his face softened into a gentle smile, and he slowly caressed her hair.

Their little princess, Leah von Herhardt, had hair just like her mother's, blonde and unbelievably soft.

* * *

There was a rose bush growing next to the gardener's grave. Layla planted it herself the summer after the grave was relocated. After over a year growing there, the bush had grown bigger and fuller, and its blossoms were even more beautiful. They were the lovely, pale-pink roses that he cherished more than any other variety.

“Mommy! It's Grandpa!” Felix shouted confidently as he stood in front of the gravestone.

Layla smiled at him and nodded. “Wow, you remembered! You're so smart, Felix!”

“And those are roses!” he said, encouraged by his mother's praise. He then proceeded to look around and name everything he laid eyes on—the sky, the trees, the birds, the clouds. After saying each word loudly to his mother, he then turned to his little sister, who was toddling around next to him, and quietly repeated each term to her. Leah could only babble in response, but Felix didn't give up on instructing her.

While the two siblings were chattering away like a pair of birds, Layla caught Uncle Bill up about everything that had happened since she last talked to him. She told him about college life. She told him about the various cute, silly things the children had been

up to. She told him how the Arvis staff were doing. And she told him about Matthias. She was now able to talk to Uncle Bill about her husband without guilt or anxiety.

Matthias had waited to tell her about the grave relocation until the whole project was complete. When he told her, she first reacted with shock, staring at him speechlessly. Then, once she processed the meaning of what he had told her, she broke down in tears. That day, she was finally relieved of the deep guilt and longing she had felt after leaving Uncle Bill in that far-off location.

"Felix! Leah!" she called.

The siblings rushed towards her at once, hand in hand. As she looked down at the four blue eyes gazing up at her, she couldn't help but giggle.

People had started to call Leah von Herhardt "Blonde Matthias."

Even Layla had started to use the nickname. It was an apt description—besides her blonde hair, which she had inherited from her mother, Leah resembled her father to a remarkable extent.

Recently, in a conversation with her mother-in-law, Layla had brought up her hope that if she and Matthias had a third child, that one might resemble her more than Matthias.

*"Give up, Layla,"* Elise replied, laughing. *"Haven't you noticed a pattern among the Herhardt family portraits?"*

Layla sank into thought for a moment before realizing the meaning of Elise's enigmatic question. All the members of the Herhardt family had remarkably similar facial features, just like Matthias and his children.

*"The Herhardt bloodline is very potent. You should take it as a victory that Leah inherited your hair color,"* Elise flatly said.

As Layla heard this, it occurred to her that the same was true of Matthias—he had inherited his mother's hair color, but the rest of his features resembled his father's.

Once she stopped giggling, Layla stepped in front of the gravestone with her children and said, "Let's say bye-bye to Grandpa." She gazed for a moment at the white baby shoes on

Leah's feet, then looked at the gravestone again.

“See you next time, Grandpa,” Felix said, sounding very mature.

After watching her brother speak, Leah burst into innocent laughter, and then did her best to imitate him, saying, “Gram... pa! Grampa! Grampa!” Her voice rang out like a beautiful song.

* * *

Layla returned to the mansion in time for lunch. Matthias was away on a business lunch, so the table only held settings for the three duchesses.

Once the meal was over, Layla mustered up the courage to ask, “Would it be all right if I start using the cottage by the forest as a research lab?” After plenty of deliberation, this was how she had decided to use Uncle Bill's cottage, which was now hers.

“A lab…?” Katharina replied, looking at Layla with interest. “That's not a bad idea. You'd be near all the plants and birds that you study, after all.” Shifting her gaze from Layla to Elise, she asked, “What do you think, Elise?”

“Well, the cottage belongs to you, Layla, so why are you asking for our permission?” Elise asked, furrowing her brow slightly.

“I know the cottage is mine, but it's part of Arvis, which is under both of your purview, so I'd like to have your permission before making any changes,” Layla replied, before laughing nervously.

The indifferent expression on Elise's face then gave way to a grin. “Sounds like you’re planning to continue your studies even after graduation, then?”

“Pardon?” Layla replied. “Oh... Yes, yes I am.”

“That's fine, dear. Best not to let that big brain of yours go to waste. I must say, I like the thought of Duchess Herhardt becoming a Ratse University professor.”

“A professor?” Layla asked, amazed at what she was hearing. She knew she wanted to continue her studies after graduation, but she hadn't set any more concrete goals than that.

“Don't be surprised, dear. Don't you think you'd find it easier to

become a professor than to become the queen of high society?" Elise asked, playfully raising one eyebrow.

In that moment, Layla realized that Matthias had inherited more than just his hair color from his mother. He had gotten his sense of humor from her as well.

"Study hard, dear," Elise said, speaking in a quiet tone like her son often did. "As for the cottage, do whatever you like with it."

* * *

"Daddy!" Felix excitedly shouted when he saw the black car parked in front of the riverside cabin.

Layla and Leah looked up from the flowers they had been examining on the side of the trail. As soon as the chauffeur opened the rear passenger door, Matthias stepped out of the car. It seemed that he had not forgotten the promise he had made to take the children out boating.

Layla quickly took out her handkerchief and wiped the dew from her fingers. Before she finished, Felix had already started running towards his father. Leah excitedly toddled behind him.

Layla took up the rear, watching the children to make sure they didn't stumble and fall. The skirt of her turquoise sundress flapped gently in the breeze, as did the ends of her straw hat's lace ribbon, which was tied under her chin. Her hair also bounced gently against the back of her neck as she walked.

The look in Matthias's eyes deepened as he watched his wife and two children walking along the sunny riverside.

Suddenly he recalled something Layla had said to him recently while looking at Leah: *"It makes no difference to me whether Leah looks more like you or like me. What I find amazing, though, is that she looks like you, even though you wanted her to look like me. Usually you always get what you want, but not this time!"*

He had wanted to reply that this actually *was* what he wanted, but instead he just laughed.

At first he had thought he wanted their daughter to look like

Layla. After all, this was what Layla had said she wanted, and it was what most men who loved their wives would want.

However, at night, when he gazed at Layla's face as she lay sleeping in his arms, he felt quite a different desire. He wanted there to be only one woman in the world who looked like Layla: Layla herself. He wanted to be the only man in the world who possessed a woman who looked like Layla. He wanted this now, in the future, and forevermore.

*I guess she still drives me wild*, he thought to himself, sighing, as he kissed his sleeping wife's forehead, cheeks, and gently parted lips. As he softly rubbed the bridge of her nose and caressed her hair, he couldn't help but laugh at himself. He felt ridiculous for failing to be a perfect husband no matter how hard he tried. His love for Layla was a little twisted, and for all he knew it would stay that way until the day he died. However, he didn't mind this, as long as Layla remained his until the end.

He started walking towards his children as they rushed towards him. He scooped them both up into his arms. As soon as he did, Felix once again showed his innocent love by kissing him on the cheek. Matthias kissed him right back, and then kissed Leah, the new joy in his life.

Watching them with delight, Layla said, “Matty! You're early!”

The smile on her face was the most radiantly beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Felix grew restless and started to struggle, so Matthias put him down. Still holding Leah, he walked up to Layla. They laughed warmly as they shared an intimate kiss.

He wanted Layla's love to be like this—warm and peaceful enough for her to forget the challenges and loneliness of her childhood years, and for the emotional wounds he had given her in the past to heal. He now knew that they both loved each other dearly, though perhaps in different ways. In fact, he didn't care if he loved her more than she did him. He knew that the vast world of love contains areas of both light and shadow. If loving her more

meant being in the shadows, he would gladly reside there, because his happiness was in her brilliant light.

He held out his hand, and she placed hers in it. The happy family of four walked along the edge of the glittering river, the father carrying the daughter, the mother holding the son's hand.

As they passed under the shade of the large tree that was Layla's favorite, Matthias slowly turned his head and looked back along the path they had just walked. His gaze shifted from the shadowy forest, to the glistening river, to the birds flying in the clear sky, before finally settling again on Layla's face.

“Layla.”

As she turned her head upon hearing his voice, her smile grew even more radiant, and her eyes shimmered in the afternoon sunlight, mirroring the eternal summer of the forest.